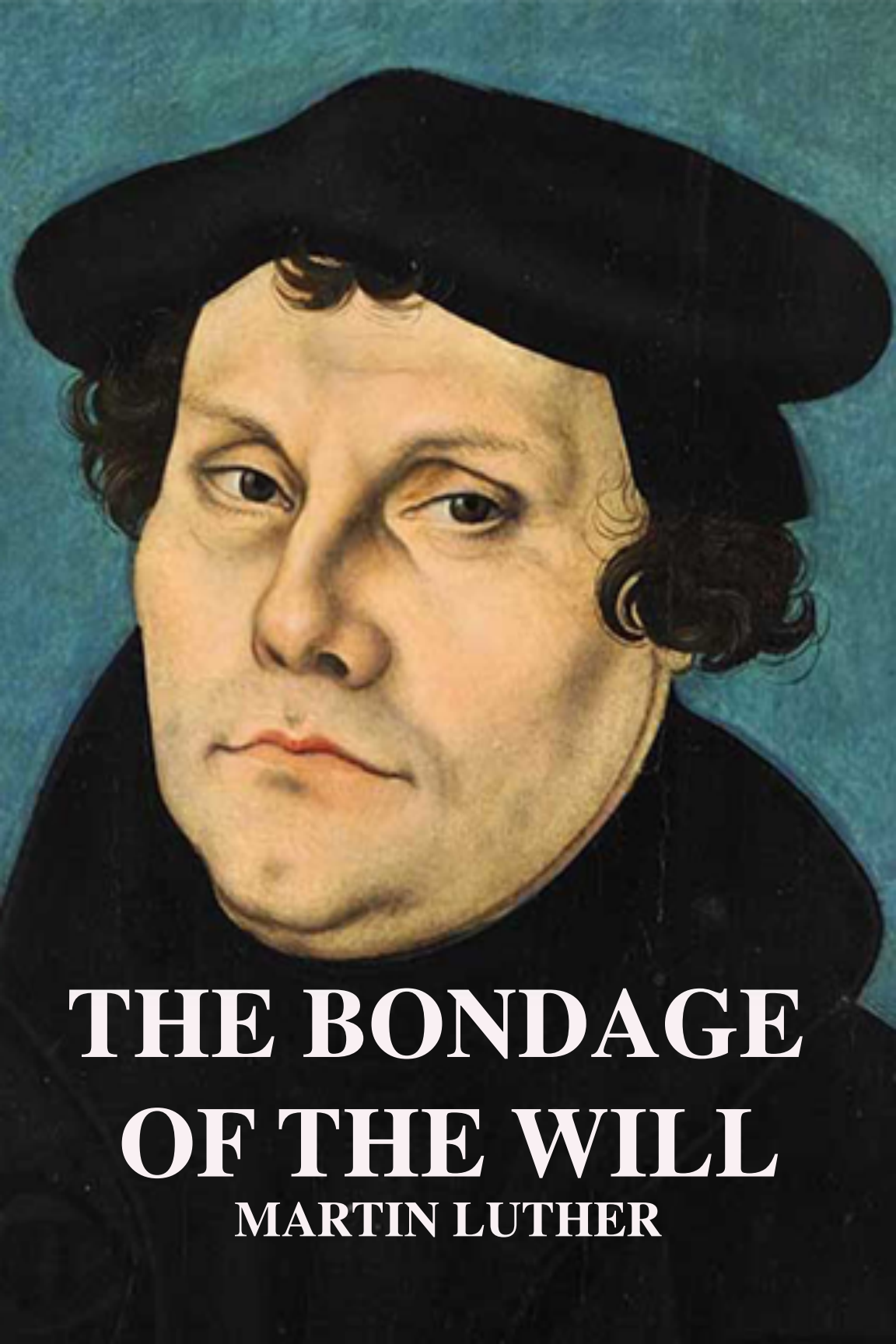


THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

MARTIN LUTHER

THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL
A Modern English Edition

by
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Translated by Henry Cole
Edited and Modernised by David Clarke
Originally Published 1525

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Foreword

The publication of this modern English edition of The Bondage of the Will has its origins in a request from Pastor William Ola Poloc, Principal of the theological institute in Baguio City, Philippines. That request, however, is itself the fruit of a remarkable work of God's sovereign grace that began more than twenty-five years ago.

In 2001, while engaged in a Christian mission to the Philippines through Trojan Horse International, I first met William Ola Poloc in New Bilibid Prison, where he was serving a fourteen-year sentence following a conviction for homicide. It was there, while imprisoned, that William was brought by the grace of God to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Having come to know Christ for himself, he devoted himself to teaching the Gospel to his fellow inmates, faithfully proclaiming the saving grace of God to those among whom he lived.

Following his release in August 2002, Trojan Horse International commissioned William to return to his own people in Baguio City and to continue preaching the Gospel throughout the city and within the prisons of Benguet District. Since that time the Lord has been pleased to bless that work. Churches have been established, men have been called into the Christian ministry, and a theological institute has been founded for the training of future pastors and Christian workers.

William's testimony is recorded in his autobiographical work, Called from Darkness into His Marvellous Light, in which he describes how, through the study of the Holy Scriptures, he came to understand that salvation is wholly the work of God and that, as Jonah declared, "Salvation is of the LORD" (Jonah 2:9). That conviction has remained central to his ministry ever since.

It was therefore especially fitting that, many years later, Pastor Poloc should request copies of Martin Luther's The Bondage of the Will for approximately sixty theological students under his care. Luther's great defence of God's sovereign grace addresses the very truths that transformed William's own life and now form the foundation of the theological instruction being given to future pastors in the Philippines.

Although Henry Cole's nineteenth-century translation remains one of the finest English versions available, its language presents difficulties for many modern readers. Since English continues to be widely used in theological education throughout the Philippines, while Tagalog remains the heart language of many students, it seemed appropriate

first to prepare a carefully modernised English edition that may, in due course, serve as the basis for a faithful Tagalog translation.

The purpose of this edition extends beyond making Luther's work more accessible. It is intended to assist students of Scripture in understanding one of the most important theological controversies in the history of the Christian Church. The accompanying historical Introduction has therefore been prepared to trace the doctrine of the bondage of the human will from the testimony of Holy Scripture, through the early Church, the medieval period, the Protestant Reformation, and the historic Protestant confessions. It is hoped that readers will gain not only a clearer understanding of Luther's arguments but also an appreciation of their enduring significance within the history of Christian theology.

It is also my hope that this volume will encourage Christians in England and throughout the English-speaking world to rediscover the great theological treasures of the Protestant Reformation. It would be a remarkable providence if those for whom these writings were originally preserved should be inspired by the enthusiasm of believers in the Philippines to read them afresh and recover truths that, in many places, have been neglected or forgotten.

Above all, it is my prayer that this edition will direct every reader beyond Martin Luther himself to the Holy Scriptures, through which God reveals His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the glorious Gospel of His sovereign grace. If, under the blessing of God, this work strengthens pastors, theological students, and Christian believers in their knowledge of Christ and His saving grace, and if it eventually becomes the foundation of a Tagalog translation for future generations, then the labour devoted to this edition will have been abundantly rewarded.

David Clarke.
Bierton Particular Baptists,
2026

Preface

Henry Atherton
June 1931

The following Preface was written by Henry Atherton for the Sovereign Grace Union edition of The Bondage of the Will, published

in 1931. It has been lightly modernised in spelling, punctuation, and grammar for ease of reading, while preserving the author's original meaning and theological convictions.

This remarkable work by that eminent servant of God, Martin Luther, one of the great Reformers, is widely regarded as one of his finest writings, if not the greatest of all his works. Luther himself considered it to be his most important publication.

I had originally intended to include a brief account of both Erasmus and Luther, together with an outline of the controversy that forms the subject of this book. However, the many demands upon my time, coupled with a desire to place this volume into the hands of readers as soon as possible, have prevented me from doing so.

Although Luther occasionally employed expressions that I would not personally choose to use, I have remained faithful to his language as translated by Henry Cole. Luther must be permitted to speak for himself.

This book is especially needed in our own day. The teaching of many who call themselves Protestants is often far more in harmony with the doctrines of Rome, or with the views of Erasmus, than with the principles upheld by the Reformers. In many cases, their teaching is closer to the decrees of the Council of Trent than to the historic Protestant and Reformed confessions of faith.

Should it please the Lord to use this work to open the eyes of those who have been led astray by such errors, enabling them to see that they have embraced doctrines contrary to the Word of God and to the Protestant Reformed faith, and should He graciously bring them back to the old paths of biblical truth, then the labours of The Sovereign Grace Union will not have been in vain.

The preparation of this volume has been a labour of love. Though it has often been carried out amid physical pain and many sleepless nights, it has nevertheless been a source of great joy. I am thankful to see it published, and I earnestly pray that the Lord may be pleased to bless it to the gathering of His elect and to the maintenance of His truth and cause in the generation in which we live.

Henry Atherton
Grove Chapel Parsonage
Camberwell Grove, S.E.5
June 1931

Editor's Note

The present edition of The Bondage of the Will is based upon the classic English translation by Henry Cole, first published in 1823. For more than two centuries, Cole's translation has been widely recognised as one of the most faithful and readable English renderings of Luther's original work and has therefore been retained as the foundation of this edition.

The Preface written by Henry Atherton for the Sovereign Grace Union edition of 1931 has also been preserved as an important part of the publication history of this work. It has been lightly modernised in spelling, punctuation, and grammar to improve readability while carefully preserving Atherton's original meaning and theological convictions.

Throughout the present volume, Henry Cole's translation has likewise been carefully modernised. Archaic spelling, obsolete grammatical forms, punctuation, and expressions have been updated where necessary to assist contemporary readers, while every effort has been made to preserve Luther's meaning, theological precision, distinctive style, and force of argument. No attempt has been made to alter Luther's doctrine or to reinterpret his teaching.

Where possible, Scripture references have been verified and standardised to assist the reader. The text, however, remains faithful to Luther's own use of Scripture as represented in Cole's translation.

To provide the historical and theological context necessary for a fuller understanding of Luther's work, a new Editor's Introduction has been added. This traces the development of the doctrine of the bondage of the human will from the testimony of Holy Scripture through the early Church, the medieval period, the Protestant Reformation, and the historic Protestant confessions, thereby placing Luther's treatise within the wider history of Christian theology.

It is hoped that these editorial revisions will enable a new generation of readers to engage more readily with one of the most significant theological works of the Protestant Reformation while remaining faithful to the substance and spirit of Luther's original treatise.

The following Prefaces by Henry Atherton (1931) and Henry Cole (1823) have each been lightly modernised in spelling, punctuation, and grammar for ease of reading, while preserving the authors' original meaning, style, and theological convictions.

David Clarke
Bierton Particular Baptists
2026

Editor's Introduction

The controversy concerning the bondage of the human will did not begin with Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus, nor did it begin with Augustine and Pelagius. Its origins lie in the opening chapters of Holy Scripture, where God created man upright, in His own image, endowed with true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, and placed him under a covenant of obedience. The question that has occupied theologians throughout the centuries is this: What was lost when Adam fell, and what remains of man's ability to turn to God?

From the earliest pages of Scripture to the great theological debates of the Reformation, the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility has stood at the heart of Christian doctrine. The answer given to this question shapes one's understanding of sin, grace, salvation, faith, regeneration, and the glory that belongs to God alone in the redemption of fallen sinners.

The purpose of this Introduction is to provide readers with the biblical, historical, and theological background necessary to understand the controversy that culminated in the celebrated exchange between Erasmus and Luther in 1525. Rather than assuming familiarity with the subject, it traces the development of this doctrine from its foundation in Holy Scripture through the principal periods of church history, demonstrating how the Church has wrestled with these questions across the centuries.

The study therefore begins with the creation of man and the entrance of sin into the world through Adam's transgression. It examines the effects of the Fall upon human nature and the will, before considering the early controversies between Augustine and Pelagius, the rise of Semi-Pelagianism, and the theological developments of the medieval Church. From there, attention is given to the humanism of the Renaissance, the challenge presented by Erasmus, and Luther's decisive response in The Bondage of the Will, a work that he himself regarded as among the most important of all his writings.

The discussion then follows the influence of Luther's teaching throughout the Protestant Reformation and into the great confessional standards that shaped historic Protestant theology, including the

Lutheran Confessions, the Reformed Confessions, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Second London Baptist Confession of 1689.

Although nearly five centuries have passed since Luther wrote this treatise, the issues it addresses remain of profound importance. Questions concerning the nature of free will, the extent of human ability, the necessity of divine grace, and the sovereignty of God in salvation continue to occupy theologians and divide opinion within the Christian Church. For this reason, The Bondage of the Will remains not merely a work of historical interest but one of enduring theological significance.

This Introduction does not seek to replace Luther's arguments but to prepare the reader to understand them within their biblical and historical setting. It is my hope that the chapters which follow will demonstrate that the controversy over the human will is not a peripheral question but one that reaches to the very heart of the Gospel itself. Above all, it is my prayer that every reader will be led to a deeper appreciation of the sovereign grace of God revealed in the Holy Scriptures and of the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ alone.

David Clarke
Bierton Particular Baptists
2026

Martin Luther's Preface

Martin Luther to the Venerable Erasmus of Rotterdam
Grace and Peace in Christ

That I have delayed so long in answering your Diatribe on Free Will, venerable Erasmus, has surprised everyone, including myself. It is certainly contrary to my usual practice. In the past, I have not only welcomed opportunities to write on matters such as these, but have often sought them out of my own accord.

Some may wonder at this unusual restraint in Luther. They may ask why the man who could not be silenced by the boasts, taunts, and letters of his opponents, congratulating Erasmus on his victory and singing songs of triumph, has now remained silent. They may suppose that this stubborn champion has at last found an adversary worthy of him, one against whom he dares not open his mouth.

Yet I freely concede to you what I have never conceded to anyone before. You surpass me in eloquence and natural ability. Everyone acknowledges this, and rightly so. I am but a

barbarian in comparison and do all things in a barbarous manner.

Indeed, you have dampened my enthusiasm for this contest, and for two reasons.

First, by your skill. You conduct this discussion with such apparent moderation and courtesy that it is difficult to become angry with you.

Secondly, on so great a subject, you have said very little that has not already been said before. In fact, you attribute less to free will than many of the Schoolmen have done before you, though even that shall be discussed later. Consequently, it almost seems unnecessary to answer arguments that have already been refuted many times over.

These arguments have not only been answered by me but thoroughly crushed by Philip Melanchthon in his incomparable work Concerning Theological Questions. In my judgment, that book deserves not merely to be remembered, but almost to be numbered among the great books of the Church.

Compared with it, your work appears weak and disappointing. I regret that such elegant language should be employed in support of such poor arguments. It is as though rubbish were carried in vessels of gold and silver.

I suspect you yourself sensed this difficulty. You were reluctant to undertake this work because your conscience told you that all the power of your eloquence would be required, and yet even then you would not be able to conceal the weakness of your cause. Once the ornament of language was stripped away, the substance beneath would remain exposed.

For although I may be unskilled in speech, by the grace of God I am not unskilled in understanding.

Contents

Foreword	3
Preface	4
Editor's Note	6
Editor's Introduction	7
Martin Luther's Preface	8
Discussion PART ONE	15
Erasmus' Preface Reviewed	15
Erasmus' Scepticism	15
The Necessity Of Knowing God And His Power	25
The Sovereignty Of God	29
The Authority Of Scripture And The Duty Of Speaking The Truth	53
The Necessity Of Divine Sovereignty	58
Exortium	67
The Authority Of Scripture	68
The Empty Claim Of Free Will	70
The True Church And The Visible Church	74
The Saints Of God And The Judgment Of Charity	76
The Judgment Of The Spirit And The Authority Of Scripture	78
The Clarity Of Holy Scripture	81
The Clarity Of Scripture Defended	86
Why Learned Men Have Remained Blind	90
The Testimony Of Erasmus Against Himself	92
Luther's Conclusion To The Introduction	94
The Definition Of Free Will Examined	96
The Inability Of Man To Seek Eternal Life	100
The Consequences Of Erasmus' Definition	102
The Contradictions Of Free Will	104
The Appeal To Ecclesiasticus	106
Contradictions In Erasmus' Opinions	108
The Fiction Of A Neutral Will	113
The Three Opinions Are One	115
The Testimony Of Ecclesiasticus Examined	117
The Testimony Of Genesis Examined	124
The Distinction Between Law And Gospel	133
The New Testament, Free Will, And Merit	152

Merit And Reward 154
Of Scripture Rewards, Promises, And The Purpose 156
Why God Uses His Word 157
The Fruits Belong To Those Who Receive Them 159
The power to become the sons of god 161
Paul And The Bondage Of The Will 163
DISCUSSION PART TWO 167
The Bondage Of The Will 167

SECOND PART. Sec. LXXVI to Sect. CXII. 167

The Scriptures Which Overthrow Free Will 167
The danger of inventing tropes 168
The Plain Meaning Of Scripture Must Stand 172
Pharaoh Proves The Falsehood Of These Tropes 174
Even The Diatribe's Explanation Cannot Save Free Will 176
The Similitudes Of The Sun And The Rain Do Not Help Free Will 178
Reason's Offence At The Sovereignty Of God 181
The Act Of Hardening Explained 187
The Secret Counsels Of God 191
The Failure Of The Diatribe's Interpretation 193
The Diatribe's Unintended Confession 199
God's Prescience And Omnipotence Destroy Free Will 201
Why This Doctrine Offends Human Reason 203
Paul's Argument And The Potter's Clay 205
The Necessity Of Immutability 207
The Necessity Of The Consequence 209
The Misuse Of Jerome And The Evasion Of The Diatribe 212
Paul's Argument From Jacob And Esau 213
Jacob And Esau: God's Purpose Before Their Birth 215
"Jacob Have I Loved, But Esau Have I Hated" 216
DISCUSSION PART THREE 275
The Sovereignty of grace defended 275
Conclusion 340

FURTHER READING 345

CALLED FROM DARKNESS INTO HIS MARVELLOUS LIGHT 345
LET CHRISTIAN MEN BE MEN 346
ELDERSHIP IS MALE 347
CONVERTED ON LSD TRIP 349
TROJAN WARRIORS 350
THE FALL, DESPERATION AND RECOVERY 351

DISCUSSION PART ONE
Discussion PART ONE

Section I

Erasmus' Preface Reviewed

Why then do you commend a spirit that refuses to make firm assertions?

You may reply that you were not speaking of confessing Christ or defending His doctrine. Very well. I shall not presume to judge your motives, and I leave the judgment of your heart to God. Yet I must urge you to be more careful with your words.

Whatever your intentions may be, your language conveys a dangerous impression. If you truly believe that the doctrine of Free Will is unnecessary and unrelated to Christ, then your words may be sincere, but your judgement is gravely mistaken. If, however, you acknowledge that the matter is important and intimately connected with the Christian faith, then your criticism of certainty and conviction is itself misplaced.

For if the issue is important, why complain about firm assertions and theological controversy? Serious questions demand serious answers. The nature of the subject itself requires it.

Section II

Erasmus' Scepticism

But what are we to make of your further statements? For your remarks are not confined merely to the subject of Free Will. They extend to Christian doctrine as a whole. You openly declare that, were it not for the authority of Holy Scripture and the decrees of the Church, you would gladly embrace the position of the sceptics.

What are we to make of such language?

You speak of the "inviolable authority" of Scripture and the Church, yet at the same time express a desire to be free from their certainty. How can a man profess such reverence for divine authority while simultaneously wishing for the liberty of scepticism? What Christian could speak in this manner?

If you are referring only to matters that are doubtful, unimportant, or speculative, then you have said nothing remarkable. Every sensible Christian exercises caution in such matters and refuses to quarrel over things that God has not clearly revealed.

But if you are speaking about the essential truths of the Christian faith, then what could be more alarming than a desire to suspend judgement concerning them?

A Christian ought to say the very opposite. He should confess that he is so far removed from scepticism that he desires to cling firmly to the Word of God in all its parts. Indeed, wherever God has spoken, the believer ought to seek the greatest possible certainty. What condition is more miserable than uncertainty concerning divine truth? You further declare:

> "To these authorities I submit my judgement in all things,
> whether I follow what they command or not."

But what does this mean?

Is it not enough to submit one's judgement to the authority of Scripture? Why must it also be submitted to the decrees of men? If the Church can decree something beyond what Scripture teaches, then by what standard are such decrees to be judged?

The Apostle Paul teaches that matters are to be examined and judged (1 Corinthians 14). Why then should Christians surrender the responsibility of testing what they are taught? Where does Scripture command us to abandon discernment and place ourselves unquestioningly under human authority?

More troubling still is your statement that you submit yourself whether you follow these authorities or not. What Christian speaks in such a manner" Submission that does not lead to obedience is no submission at all.

A believer is called to follow what he believes. How can a man genuinely believe what he has no intention of obeying?

Perhaps you mean that complete understanding is impossible, and therefore complete obedience cannot be expected. Yet if absolute comprehension were required before faith could exist, no one could ever follow anything. The Christian follows God not because he comprehends everything, but because he trusts the One who has revealed Himself.

In the end, your words seem to suggest that it matters little what a person believes, provided public peace is preserved. Men may affirm or deny whatever suits their circumstances, so long as controversy is avoided and society remains undisturbed.

This reduces Christian doctrine to the level of philosophical opinion. It implies that theological truth is not worth defending and that certainty concerning divine revelation is both unnecessary and troublesome.

According to this reasoning, believers ought to lay down their weapons, cease contending for the truth, and stop debating matters that concern the faith. Peace, it seems, is to be valued above truth itself.

My dear Erasmus, I suspect you understand where such thinking leads.

I shall not press the point further, nor will I attempt to judge your motives. I gladly acknowledge your desire for peace and your intention to avoid needless conflict. Yet I urge you to proceed carefully.

The Spirit of God searches the heart and is not deceived by carefully chosen words.

I have addressed these matters because you repeatedly accuse us of stubbornness and dogmatism. Yet such accusations reveal more about your own position than ours. They suggest a sympathy with those ancient sceptics who doubted everything and committed themselves to nothing. Let them keep their uncertainty.

As for us, we shall continue to affirm and defend the truth God has revealed. We shall delight in certainty because God Himself has spoken.

The Holy Spirit is not a sceptic. What He writes upon the hearts of believers are not doubts, probabilities, or human opinions, but convictions. These convictions are more certain than life itself and more reliable than all human experience.

Section III

I now come to another point closely connected with the previous one. You distinguish between Christian doctrines, claiming that some are necessary while others are not. You further maintain that some doctrines are clear, while others are obscure and difficult to understand.

In saying this, you are merely repeating the opinions of others, or perhaps displaying your skill in rhetoric. To support your position, you appeal to Paul's words:

> "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33)

and to Isaiah's question:

> "Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counsellor hath taught him?" (Isaiah 40:13)

You can speak in this way only because you have either forgotten that you are writing against Luther, or because you imagine you are writing

merely for the public at large. I trust, however, that you will grant me some acquaintance with the Scriptures and some measure of judgement in handling them.

Since you make distinctions, allow me to make one also.

There is a great difference between God Himself and the Scriptures which God has given. No one denies that there are many things hidden in God which He has not revealed to us. Concerning the last day, Christ Himself said:

> "But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only." (Matthew 24:36)

Again:

> "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power." (Acts 1:7)

Likewise Christ says:

> "I know whom I have chosen." (John 13:18)

And Paul writes:

> "The Lord knoweth them that are his." (2 Timothy 2:19)

Many such examples could be given.

Therefore, I readily acknowledge that there are secret things known only to God.

But that is not the question.

The claim that Scripture itself is obscure in its teaching and that its doctrines are hidden from believers is a fiction invented by the Sophists, whose language you have unfortunately adopted. Yet they have never proved their case, nor can they produce a single article of faith that remains hidden because of any defect in Scripture itself.

Indeed, Satan has used this very argument to keep men away from the Scriptures. By persuading people that the Bible is dark, difficult, and inaccessible, he has made them despise God's Word and turn instead to the speculations of human philosophy.

I freely admit that there are difficult passages in Scripture. Some texts contain unfamiliar expressions, unusual grammar, or matters that require careful study. But these difficulties do not obscure the substance of Scripture's teaching.

For what essential truth remains hidden?

The seals have been opened. The stone has been rolled away from the

tomb. The greatest mysteries of God's redemption have been revealed.

Christ has come in the flesh.

God is both Trinity and Unity.

Christ suffered for sinners.

Christ reigns forever.

These truths are not hidden away in secret chambers. They are proclaimed openly throughout the world. They are preached in our churches, taught in our homes, and confessed by believers everywhere.

Remove Christ from the Scriptures, and what remains?

The whole purpose of Scripture is to reveal Him.

Therefore, everything necessary for salvation has been clearly made known. Some passages may contain difficult words, yet the truths themselves remain plain. To claim that Scripture is obscure because certain expressions require explanation is both unreasonable and irreverent.

A truth may be expressed obscurely in one place and clearly in another. Scripture interprets Scripture. What appears difficult in one passage is illuminated elsewhere.

The fact that some men fail to understand certain texts does not mean that God's revelation is unclear.

Consider a public fountain standing in the middle of a marketplace. Would anyone say that the fountain is hidden simply because a man standing in a dark alley cannot see it? The fault lies not with the fountain but with the man's position.

So it is with the Scriptures. The light shines openly before all. If some remain in darkness, the problem is not with the Word of God but with those who refuse to come into its light.

Section IV

Your reference to the darkness of the Corycian cave proves nothing. Scripture is not like that. The greatest truths and the deepest mysteries of God are no longer hidden away in dark corners. They have been brought into the open and plainly revealed.

Christ Himself has opened our understanding to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). The Gospel is preached to every creature (Mark 16:15; Colossians 1:23). The Psalmist declares:

"Their sound is gone out into all the earth." (Psalm 19:4)

Paul writes:

"Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning." (Romans 15:4)

And again:

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine." (2 Timothy 3:16)

Therefore, let all the Sophists come forward and produce a single doctrine or mystery that remains hidden because Scripture has failed to reveal it.

If many things remain obscure to certain individuals, the fault does not lie with Scripture but with the blindness of the human heart. Men fail to see the truth, not because God's Word is unclear, but because they refuse to walk in its light.

Paul says of unbelieving Israel:

"Their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away." (2 Corinthians 3:14-15)

And again:

"If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not." (2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

A man may cover his own eyes and then complain that the sun does not shine. He may leave the light and hide himself in darkness, then accuse the day of being obscure. Such reasoning is absurd.

Let men cease, therefore, from attributing the darkness of their own hearts to the all-clear Word of God. The obscurity lies not in Scripture, but in themselves.

You also misuse Paul's words concerning the incomprehensible judgments of God. When Paul speaks of God's judgments being beyond searching out, he is speaking of God, not of Scripture.

He does not say:

"The judgments of Scripture are incomprehensible."

He says:

"How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" (Romans 11:33)

Likewise, Isaiah does not ask:

"Who hath known the mind of Scripture?"

but rather:

"Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counsellor hath taught him?" (Isaiah 40:13)

There is a vast difference between the two.

Indeed, Paul teaches that believers do know the mind of the Lord in those things He has graciously revealed to them (1 Corinthians 2:10, 16). Your use of these passages therefore misses the point entirely. They no more support your argument concerning Free Will than many of the other texts you have cited.

The same may be said of your other examples. You refer to such matters as the distinction of the divine Persons, the union of Christ's divine and human natures, and the unpardonable sin, claiming that uncertainty still surrounds these doctrines.

But if you mean the endless speculations and disputes of the Schoolmen, I readily agree. Yet what fault lies with Scripture? Why should the pure Word of God be blamed for the confusion introduced by men?

Scripture plainly teaches the Trinity. It plainly teaches the incarnation of Christ. It plainly teaches the reality of the unpardonable sin. There is no obscurity in these doctrines as Scripture presents them.

What Scripture does not do is satisfy every curious question men invent concerning them. Nor is it required to do so.

The Sophists have filled the Church with their own speculations and then blamed Scripture for the confusion they themselves created. Let their theories be condemned, but let the Word of God be acquitted.

If, however, you mean the doctrines themselves, then the fault lies not with Scripture but with those who reject its testimony. The Arians denied the Trinity not because Scripture was unclear, but because they refused to believe what it plainly taught. The same is true of all who remain blind to the glory of Christ through the deceitfulness of Satan.

To speak briefly, the clarity of Scripture is twofold, just as obscurity is twofold.

There is an external clarity, which belongs to the Word itself as it is preached and written.

There is also an internal clarity, which belongs to the understanding of the heart.

With regard to internal understanding, no man can rightly grasp Scripture apart from the Spirit of God. By nature the human heart is darkened. Men may discuss the doctrines of Scripture, teach them, and even defend them, yet remain strangers to their power and truth.

As the Psalmist says:

> "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." (Psalm 14:1)

Only the Holy Spirit can open the eyes of the heart and bring true understanding.

But when we speak of the external clarity of Scripture, the matter is entirely different. In that respect nothing essential is hidden. Everything necessary for faith and salvation has been set forth plainly.

The truths of Scripture have been brought into the light by the Word of God itself and proclaimed openly throughout the world.

Section V

What is even more troubling is your decision to place the doctrine of Free Will among those subjects which you regard as unnecessary and unprofitable, while at the same time offering your own summary of what you believe is essential to Christian piety.

The remarkable thing is that the summary you provide could just as easily have been written by a Jew or a pagan who knows nothing of Christ. Throughout it all, Christ is scarcely mentioned. One might almost conclude that you believe Christian piety can exist without Christ, provided a man worships God and acknowledges Him to be merciful.

What am I to say to such a position, Erasmus?

To my mind, it bears a stronger resemblance to the philosophy of Lucian and Epicurus than to the faith of Christ. If you truly regard this subject as unnecessary for Christians, then we have no common ground upon which to stand. You may leave the field, for I regard it as a matter of the utmost importance.

You claim that it is irreverent, curious, and unnecessary to enquire whether God foreknows all things, whether man's will contributes anything to his salvation, whether the will is active or passive under the operation of divine grace, and whether the good and evil we do arise from our own power or from necessity under God's sovereign rule.

But if these questions are unnecessary, then what questions are

necessary?

If it is unimportant to know how God saves sinners, how grace operates, or what part the human will plays in salvation, then what remains worthy of serious theological consideration?

I find it difficult to excuse such statements as mere ignorance. You are no novice. You have spent many years among Christians, studied the Scriptures, and gained a reputation as a scholar. Therefore, your words leave little room for charitable explanation.

What surprises me even more is that your supporters tolerate such statements. They overlook them only because you are writing against Luther. Were the same words spoken by someone else, they would condemn them without hesitation.

Plato is a friend, and Socrates is a friend, but truth must be honoured above them both.

Even an opponent of Christianity ought to understand what Christians regard as essential and what they do not. Yet you, a theologian and teacher of Christians, undertaking to provide a guide to Christian doctrine, not only express doubt concerning matters of the greatest importance, but actually declare them to be unnecessary.

This is astonishing.

For if these doctrines are not necessary, then neither God, nor Christ, nor the Gospel, nor faith itself can be necessary. Indeed, not even the religion of the Jews could survive such reasoning, much less Christianity.

In the name of God, what an opportunity you provide for criticism.

How can anyone write accurately about Free Will while displaying such uncertainty concerning the most fundamental truths of Scripture and Christian doctrine?

Yet I shall restrain myself for the moment. There will be time enough to answer your arguments directly. For now, I am content to allow your own words to expose the weakness of your position.

Section VI

In your summary of Christianity, you urge men to strive with all their powers, to seek the remedy of repentance, and to pursue the mercy of God by every available means. You add that without God's mercy neither human will nor human effort can accomplish anything. You also insist that no one should despair of obtaining pardon from a God who is by

nature merciful.

Yet these statements are strangely deficient. Christ is absent from them. The Holy Spirit is absent from them. For all their elegance of expression, they are spiritually cold and lifeless.

Perhaps you have written this way in order to avoid offending those authorities to whom you feel compelled to answer. Perhaps you fear being accused of irreligion if you speak too plainly. Whatever the reason, your words leave the reader with little more than vague moral instruction.

You speak of human powers, of striving, of repentance, of mercy, and of God's goodness. But what do these things mean?

What powers does man possess?

How far do those powers extend?

What can the human will actually accomplish?

In what sense is it active, and in what sense is it passive?

What can it do, and what can it not do?

Unless these questions are answered, how can anyone know what he is supposed to do?

Yet this is precisely the point you insist we ought not to investigate. You tell us that it is irreverent, curious, and unnecessary to ask whether the human will contributes anything to salvation or whether it is entirely dependent upon the operation of divine grace.

And yet, in the very same breath, you urge men to strive with all their powers.

You cannot have it both ways.

If man is to strive, then the will must be doing something. If the will can accomplish nothing without the mercy of God, then it is dependent upon grace. In one statement you make the will active; in the next you make it passive.

The question is not whether these things are true, but what they mean and how they relate to one another.

How much belongs to God's grace?

How much belongs to man's will?

What is man commanded to do?

What is God alone able to do?

These are the very questions you refuse to answer.

Instead, you leave everything undefined and uncertain. You speak in such a way that neither side can claim you fully, while neither side can completely reject you.

This is the wisdom by which you hope to steer safely between opposing positions. You seek to avoid offending either party. Like a sailor navigating between Scylla and Charybdis, you attempt to pass through the middle without committing yourself to either shore.

But such caution cannot last forever.

For when the storm finally comes and the waves rise around you, you will find yourself forced to choose. Then you will be compelled to affirm what you presently deny, and deny what you presently affirm.

For truth does not permit a man to remain suspended between yes and no indefinitely.

Section VII

The Necessity Of Knowing God And His Power

Set. VII. to Sect. VIII

Let me place your theology before your own eyes by means of a few illustrations.

Suppose a man intends to write a poem or deliver an oration, yet never pauses to consider his abilities, what he is capable of accomplishing, or what the task itself requires. He ignores the wise counsel that a man ought first to consider what his shoulders can bear and what they cannot. Instead, he rushes into the work saying, "I must simply get on with it. To ask whether I possess the learning, eloquence, or ability required is a needless and unprofitable curiosity."

Or imagine a farmer who desires a plentiful harvest but refuses to examine the nature of his soil. He ploughs without thought and scatters seed wherever he pleases, whether upon fertile ground, sand, or mud.

Or consider a general who seeks victory in war but never asks whether he has sufficient resources, capable soldiers, or a favourable opportunity. He ignores all prudent counsel and rushes into battle shouting only, "War! War!" without reflection or preparation.

What would you think of such poets, farmers, and generals?

Christ Himself asks a similar question:

> "For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost?" (Luke 14:28)

Yet this is precisely what your theology encourages.

You command men to act, to strive, and to labour. At the same time, you forbid them from examining their own condition, abilities, and limitations. You tell them that such enquiries are curious, unnecessary, and even irreligious.

In attempting to avoid recklessness, you actually promote the greatest recklessness imaginable.

The Schoolmen may often wander into foolish speculation, but at least they recognise that these questions must be addressed. You go further. You not only refuse to examine them yourself, but teach others to do the same.

Worse still, you present this recklessness as true Christian piety. You describe it as wisdom, sobriety, and spiritual maturity. Meanwhile, those who seek understanding are accused of curiosity, irreligion, and presumption.

In trying to avoid one danger, you have fallen headlong into another.

Perhaps you imagine that your eloquence will conceal the weakness of your position and prevent others from seeing where your reasoning leads. But God is not mocked (Galatians 6:7), nor can truth be hidden by skilful language.

If this confusion concerned only poetry, farming, warfare, or the ordinary affairs of life, it would be serious enough. Yet Christians are not ultimately concerned with such temporal matters.

The problem is far greater when eternal salvation is at stake.

For if men do not know what they can do, what they cannot do, or what God requires of them, how can they know whether they are walking rightly? If they do not understand their condition, how can they repent when they go astray? And where there is no repentance, there can be no salvation.

This is where your cautious and sceptical theology ultimately leads.

Therefore, it is neither irreligious, curious, nor unnecessary for a Christian to enquire whether the human will contributes anything to salvation.

On the contrary, this is the very heart of the matter.

Indeed, it is the hinge upon which our entire discussion turns.

We are examining what Free Will can do, what it cannot do, how it relates to the grace of God, and whether it acts or is acted upon. If these things remain unknown, then the whole of Christian doctrine becomes confused.

A man who does not understand this does not understand Christianity itself.

For if I do not know what I am capable of doing before God, I cannot know what God must do for me. If I do not understand the limits of my own power, I cannot understand the greatness of God's power.

Yet Scripture teaches:

"It is God which worketh all in all." (1 Corinthians 12:6)

If I fail to distinguish between God's work and my own, then I do not truly know God. And if I do not know God, I cannot worship Him rightly, praise Him, thank Him, or serve Him. For I will never know what belongs to Him and what belongs to myself.

Therefore, we must maintain a clear distinction between the power of God and the power of man, between God's working and our working.

Upon this distinction rests both the knowledge of ourselves and the knowledge of God.

For this reason, Erasmus, it is intolerable to describe such knowledge as irreligious, curious, or vain.

We owe much to learning, eloquence, and scholarship. But we owe everything to the fear of God.

Indeed, you yourself acknowledge that all good must ultimately be attributed to God. Yet if all good is truly God's work, then the human will cannot be the decisive cause of salvation. It must be acted upon rather than acting independently.

Yet having admitted this, you immediately condemn those who seek to understand it.

Such contradictions reveal a mind that remains unsettled and uncertain in the things of God.

Section VIII

Another essential part of Christianity is to understand whether God foreknows all things with certainty, or whether some events occur independently of His knowledge and purpose. Yet you dismiss this question as irreligious, curious, and unnecessary, just as the ungodly have always done. Indeed, such truths are hated by devils and condemned sinners alike. You pride yourself on avoiding these difficult subjects whenever possible.

But if you intend to write about Free Will, you cannot escape them.

No one can properly discuss Free Will without first considering what God knows, what God does, and how His purposes relate to the actions of men.

Allow me, then, though I claim no skill as a rhetorician, to remind a celebrated rhetorician of the principles of his own art.

Suppose Quintilian had set out to write a treatise on oratory and had said:

"In my judgment, all that unnecessary discussion about invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery may be omitted. It is enough simply to know that oratory is the art of speaking well."

Would not everyone laugh at such a writer?

Yet this is precisely what you have done.

You undertake to write about Free Will, yet you set aside the very questions that are fundamental to the subject. You remove the principal issues and then proceed as though the matter could still be understood. But how can anyone know what Free Will is without first knowing what the human will is capable of doing, and what God knows, ordains, and accomplishes?

Do not your own teachers of rhetoric insist that anyone discussing a subject must first establish whether it exists, then explain what it is, what its parts are, what opposes it, what is related to it, and what resembles it?

Yet you strip this poor subject of Free Will of all such examination. You scarcely address any question concerning it except the first—whether it exists at all—and even that you handle so inadequately that we shall shortly examine your arguments in detail.

I have never seen a weaker book on Free Will, though I readily acknowledge the elegance of its language.

The Schoolmen, for all their faults, at least deal with the subject more thoroughly than you do. When they discuss Free Will, they ask whether it exists, what powers belong to it, what it can accomplish, and how it relates to grace, sin, and divine sovereignty. They may not always arrive at the truth, but at least they attempt to address the proper questions.

Therefore, in this work I intend to press both you and the Schoolmen on this matter until you define for me exactly what Free Will is and what it is capable of doing.

And I trust that, by the grace of Christ, I shall press the argument so thoroughly that you will regret ever having published your Diatribe.

DISCUSSION PART ONE
Section IX

The Sovereignty Of God

Sect. IX to Sect. XL

This, then, is another truth that Christians must know and embrace: God does not merely foresee events as possibilities. Rather, He foreknows, purposes, and accomplishes all things according to His eternal, unchanging, and infallible will.

This truth strikes a fatal blow to the doctrine of Free Will. Those who wish to preserve Free Will in the sense that you propose must either deny it, ignore it, or explain it away.

Before I appeal to Scripture or present arguments of my own, however, let me first use your own words.

Have you not said, Erasmus, that God is by nature just and by nature merciful?

If that is true, then His justice and mercy must be unchanging. As God's nature cannot change, neither can His justice, mercy, wisdom, knowledge, goodness, or will.

What is true of one divine attribute must be true of them all.

If, therefore, it is pious and proper to confess that God's mercy and justice are immutable, why is it suddenly irreligious to affirm that His knowledge and will are immutable also?

You are willing to speak of God's unchanging will, yet you object when we speak of His unchanging foreknowledge.

Does God know apart from His will?

Or does He will apart from His knowledge?

Surely not.

If God foreknows, He foreknows willingly. If He wills, He wills knowingly. Therefore His knowledge and His will are equally eternal, unchanging, and inseparable.

From this it follows that everything which comes to pass does so according to God's eternal purpose.

To us, events may appear uncertain and contingent. We experience them as they unfold in time. Yet before God they are neither uncertain nor accidental. They occur according to His foreordained will.

For the will of God cannot be frustrated.

His power cannot be hindered.

His wisdom cannot be deceived.

What He purposes, He accomplishes.

What He wills must come to pass in the manner, time, place, and measure that He has determined.

If God's will could fail, then His sovereignty would fail also. But such a thought is impossible.

Human intentions often change. A man determines to build a house, and once the house is completed, his desire passes away. His will is temporary and mutable.

But God's will is not like ours.

His works may come and go within history, yet His will remains forever the same. Therefore nothing occurs by mere chance or accident before Him.

To avoid confusion, we should be careful in our use of language.

When people speak of events occurring "by chance," they usually mean that they appear unforeseen or accidental from a human perspective. But nothing is unforeseen to God. Nothing takes Him by surprise. Nothing falls outside His eternal purpose.

Thus, while many things seem contingent to us, they are all certain and determined with respect to God's sovereign will.

This is the truth that lies at the heart of the matter, and it cannot be avoided if we are to speak honestly about Free Will.

Section X

I must confess that I wish we possessed a better term than the word necessity for this discussion.

The word often creates misunderstanding because it suggests force, compulsion, or coercion. Yet that is not what we mean.

Neither God's will nor man's will acts under compulsion. Whether a person does good or evil, he acts willingly and according to his desires. Likewise, God acts freely and willingly in all that He does.

The point under discussion is not compulsion but certainty.

God's will is immutable and infallible. As Boethius expressed it:

"Immovable Thyself, Thou movement giv'st to all."

At the same time, man's will, especially in its fallen condition, possesses no power in itself to do spiritual good.

Therefore, when we speak of necessity, we are not describing a man being dragged against his will. Rather, we are speaking of the unchangeable certainty of God's purpose and the inability of fallen man to alter it.

The Schoolmen have debated this question for many years. Having failed to escape its force, they eventually retreated into a distinction of words.

They say that all things occur by a necessity of consequence, but not by a necessity of the thing itself.

Their meaning is this:

If God wills something to happen, then it must happen. Yet they argue that the event itself is not therefore necessary in its own nature, because only God possesses absolute necessity.

At first glance this may appear profound, but it accomplishes very little.

For what does it actually prove?

It merely proves that created things are not God.

No Christian has ever argued otherwise.

The real question remains unchanged.

If God's will is certain, and if whatever God wills must come to pass, then everything occurs according to that certainty. Whether the thing itself possesses necessity by nature is beside the point.

I am not God. My existence is contingent and created. Yet if God's will determined my existence, then my existence comes to pass according to His certain and unchangeable purpose.

Thus the distinction solves nothing.

It simply amounts to saying that all things happen according to God's certain will, while created things remain created things rather than God Himself.

Very well. We gladly agree.

But then the central truth remains untouched and unshaken:

Everything takes place according to the immutable will of God.

This is what the Schoolmen call the necessity of consequence.

Whatever name is given to it, the reality remains the same.

Scripture speaks plainly:

"My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure."
(Isaiah 46:10)

What could be clearer?

God's counsel stands.

His will is accomplished.

His purpose cannot fail.

Even a child can understand the meaning of such words.

Therefore, there is neither obscurity nor uncertainty here. Scripture teaches openly that all things take place according to God's sovereign and unchanging will.

Section XI

Why should these truths be considered mysterious or dangerous for Christians to discuss, when even pagan writers and ordinary people have long recognised them?

How often does Virgil speak of fate and destiny?

He writes:

"All things stand fixed by immutable law."

Again:

"Fixed is the day of every man."

And elsewhere:

"If the Fates summon you."

Throughout his writings, Virgil's purpose is clear. In the fall of Troy and the rise of Rome, he portrays destiny as accomplishing what human effort alone could never achieve.

Indeed, the ancient poets even placed their gods beneath the rule of fate. Jupiter himself, together with Juno and the other deities, was portrayed as subject to an unalterable decree. Hence the Fates were described as immutable, inexorable, and incapable of being overturned.

What led them to such conclusions?

Experience itself.

They observed that human plans often fail, and that events frequently unfold contrary to man's expectations. Men devise their schemes, yet outcomes are determined by a higher power.

Thus Virgil places these words in the mouth of Hector:

"Had Troy been able to stand by human strength, it would
have stood by mine."

The same conviction appears in the common sayings of ordinary

people:

"God's will be done."

"If God wills, we shall do it."

"Such was the will of God."

"Such was the will of heaven."

These expressions were found everywhere.

From this we may see that some awareness of God's providence, foreknowledge, and predestination has always remained among mankind, just as the knowledge of God's existence has never been entirely erased.

Yet those who wished to appear wise often denied what ordinary people instinctively recognised.

As Paul says:

"Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools."
(Romans 1:22)

Their hearts were darkened, and they rejected truths that were evident not only to poets and common people, but even to their own consciences.

Thus the problem is not that these doctrines are too obscure to be known.

The problem is that sinful men often refuse to acknowledge what they already know to be true.

For God's sovereign rule over human affairs has always been one of those truths that neither experience nor conscience can entirely suppress.

Section XII

I observe not only that these truths are true, but also that they are necessary, beneficial, and essential for every Christian to know.

For if these things are not known, there can be no true faith and no genuine worship of God. Indeed, to be ignorant of them is, in reality, to be ignorant of God Himself. And where God is unknown, salvation cannot exist.

Consider the matter carefully.

If you doubt, or refuse to know, that God foreknows and wills all things—not contingently, but certainly, necessarily, and according to His unchanging purpose—how can you confidently believe His promises?

Whenever God makes a promise, faith requires certainty that He

both knows what He has promised and possesses the power and will to accomplish it.

If there is uncertainty concerning God's knowledge or His will, then there can be no certainty concerning His promises.

And if there is no certainty concerning His promises, then faith itself is destroyed.

For faith rests upon the conviction that God is true and faithful.

To doubt His foreknowledge, His purpose, or His ability to perform what He has spoken is to undermine faith at its very foundation.

Such unbelief is no small matter. It strikes at the character of God Himself.

How can a believer rest securely in God's promises unless he is persuaded that God knows all things perfectly, wills all things certainly, and performs all things infallibly?

God's promises are trustworthy precisely because His purpose cannot change.

His knowledge cannot fail.

His will cannot be frustrated.

His word cannot be broken.

Therefore, Christians ought not merely to acknowledge these truths, but to rejoice in them.

Paul declares:

"Let God be true, but every man a liar." (Romans 3:4)

Again:

"For the word of God hath taken none effect." (Romans 9:6)

And elsewhere:

"The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his." (2 Timothy 2:19)

Likewise:

"In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began." (Titus 1:2)

And again:

"He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." (Hebrews 11:6)

All these passages rest upon the same foundation: God's unchanging

faithfulness.

If we are taught that God's foreknowledge and eternal purpose are matters which ought not to be examined, then Christian faith itself is left without any solid ground.

For how can a man trust a promise if he is uncertain whether the One who made it possesses both the knowledge and determination to fulfil it?

The greatest comfort Christians possess in every trial and affliction is the certainty that God does not lie.

He performs all that He has promised.

He accomplishes all that He has purposed.

His will cannot be resisted.

His counsel cannot be overturned.

His promises cannot fail.

Take away this certainty, and the Gospel itself is robbed of its power and consolation.

Indeed, remove the certainty of God's foreknowledge and sovereign purpose, and the promises of God, together with the whole Gospel, fall to the ground.

For faith lives by resting upon the unchanging character, knowledge, and will of God.

Section XIII

Consider, then, Erasmus, where your cautious and peace-loving theology ultimately leads.

You urge us to avoid enquiring into God's foreknowledge and the certainty with which all things come to pass. You advise Christians to leave such matters alone and to regard them as unnecessary.

But what is the result?

You teach men to remain ignorant of God.

You encourage them to neglect those very truths upon which faith depends. You weaken confidence in God's promises, diminish the consolations of the Holy Spirit, and rob the conscience of its surest foundation.

Even an Epicurean would hesitate to give such counsel.

Nor does the matter end there.

You describe those who desire to understand these truths as irreligious, curious, and vain. Meanwhile, those who ignore them are

praised as sober, pious, and wise.

What conclusion can be drawn from this except that Christians themselves must be irreligious if they seek to know God more fully?

Indeed, by this reasoning Christianity itself becomes an empty and foolish thing.

For while you seek to protect men from what you call dangerous speculation, you drive them into something far worse. In attempting to avoid one extreme, you rush headlong into another.

You discourage the pursuit of truth and promote ignorance in its place.

Can you not see where such teaching leads?

It undermines faith.

It weakens assurance.

It dishonours God.

And it deprives believers of the very comforts that the Gospel was given to provide.

I do not say these things because I believe such conclusions reflect your true intentions. I do not judge your heart, nor do I imagine that you consciously desire these errors to be taught.

Rather, I wish to show what happens when a man attempts to defend a weak position.

A person may begin with good intentions and yet find himself speaking things he never intended. When we take liberties with divine truth, we quickly discover how easily error multiplies.

The teaching of God's Word is no light matter.

James warns us that:

> "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." (James 2:10)

The same principle applies here. Once we begin treating sacred truth lightly, we soon find ourselves entangled in greater errors.

What begins as a small concession may end in serious confusion.

This, I fear, is what has happened in your case.

May the Lord forgive you and show you mercy.

I freely admit that the Schoolmen have burdened these subjects with countless useless questions and endless disputes. On this point I have criticised them more severely than you.

Yet it is a grave mistake to confuse the abuse of a doctrine with the doctrine itself.

The fact that foolish men have handled these truths badly does not make the truths themselves unworthy of study.

As Jeremiah lamented:

"How is the gold become dim!" (Lamentations 4:1)

The answer is not to discard the gold because it has been covered with dirt. Rather, the gold must be separated from the filth and restored to its proper value.

That has always been my aim.

The pure teaching of Scripture must be distinguished from the speculations and inventions of men.

Our concern is not whether the Schoolmen have argued badly.

Our concern is how sinners may come to know God, become true Christians, and find salvation through His grace.

Therefore, the abuse of these doctrines by foolish men is no argument against the doctrines themselves.

Truth must not be rejected merely because some have handled it poorly.

Section XIV

Under your third heading, Erasmus, you attempt to make us into those quiet and respectable Epicureans who prefer peace to truth.

Your advice differs somewhat from what has gone before, but it leads to the same conclusion. You say that there are certain truths which, although they may be true and capable of being known, ought not to be proclaimed openly to everyone.

Once again, however, you confuse things that ought to be carefully distinguished. You mix sacred truths with profane speculations and, in doing so, diminish the honour due to the Word of God.

As I have already shown, whatever is revealed in Holy Scripture is not only true but beneficial, necessary, and profitable for God's people. Therefore, such truths are not to be concealed but openly taught, learned, and proclaimed.

If, by these hidden matters, you mean doctrines that are clearly taught in Scripture, then you are mistaken. God's truth is not given to be locked away from His people. It is given to be preached.

But if you are referring to matters outside Scripture, then they are of no concern to me and have nothing to do with our present discussion.

You are therefore wasting both words and effort by introducing them here.

Furthermore, you know well that I do not defend the errors of the Schoolmen. You need not continually associate me with their abuses and excesses. My disagreement with them is well known.

Your task in this book is to answer Luther, not the Sophists.

I know their faults as well as you do, and I have opposed them more vigorously than many who now pretend to condemn them. Therefore, whenever you attempt to weaken my position by linking it with their speculations, you do me an injustice.

The issue before us is not the misuse of truth, but truth itself.

It is certainly true that the Schoolmen have raised many foolish questions and multiplied needless controversies. I freely admit it.

But what follows from that?

Should we reject divine truth because wicked men have abused it?

Should we abandon Scripture because some have distorted its teaching?

Certainly not.

As Jeremiah lamented:

"How is the gold become dim!" (Lamentations 4:1)

Yet no one throws away gold because it has become covered with dirt. The gold must be separated from the filth and restored to its proper value.

So it is with the truths of God.

The errors and speculations of men must be distinguished from the pure teaching of Scripture. The one must be rejected; the other must be embraced.

This has always been my purpose.

I desire that the doctrines of God's Word should be viewed in one light, and the inventions of men in another.

Nor should we imagine that we have accomplished anything merely by exposing the errors of the Schoolmen. The question is not whether they have argued badly, but whether we ourselves know the truth.

Our concern is not how many mistakes have been made in theological debate.

Our concern is how sinners may come to know God, become true Christians, and be saved through His grace.

Therefore, it is entirely beside the point to argue that some have abused these doctrines. The abuse of truth is no argument against truth

itself.

The Christian faith must be judged by the Word of God, not by the foolishness of those who have misused it.

Let the errors of men be condemned.

But let the truth of God stand.

Section XV

Let us now consider your reasons for advising that certain truths should not be openly discussed.

You suggest that although it may be true that God is present everywhere—even in the lowest and most unpleasant places—it would nevertheless be unwise to speak of such matters before ordinary people.

But this entirely misses the point.

We are not discussing what men happen to do in practice. We are discussing truth, righteousness, and the will of God. Our concern is not merely that men should live, but that they should live rightly.

Who among us lives perfectly?

Who among us acts with complete righteousness?

Yet we do not abandon the teaching of righteousness simply because men fail to practise it. Rather, the law exposes our failures and condemns our sin.

You introduce these distant and irrelevant examples because you cannot answer the central issue before us—God's foreknowledge and sovereignty. Unable to overturn the argument, you attempt instead to distract the reader with side issues and endless observations.

Let us return to the real question.

What do you mean when you say that certain truths ought not to be publicly discussed?

Do you include the doctrine of Free Will among those truths?

If you do, then everything I have already said concerning the necessity of understanding Free Will applies directly against you.

Moreover, if discussing Free Will is harmful, why did you write your Diatribe?

Why enter the debate at all?

If it is proper for you to discuss the subject, why do you condemn others for doing the same?

If the discussion is harmful, why have you contributed to it yourself?

But if Free Will does not belong among those truths which should be concealed, then your argument has wandered away from the subject entirely.

You are no longer addressing the issue before us.

Instead, like an orator who delights more in words than substance, you occupy yourself with matters that have little or nothing to do with the question under discussion.

The issue remains exactly where it was before.

Is the doctrine of Free Will important for Christians to understand?

If it is, then it must be openly discussed.

If it is not, then neither you nor anyone else should be writing about it.

You cannot consistently hold both positions at the same time.

Section XVI

Nor is your illustration appropriate when you suggest that it is unprofitable, or even dangerous, to speak openly before ordinary people about God's presence in all places—even in what men regard as lowly, unpleasant, or unclean.

Your thoughts concerning God are far too human.

I readily admit that there are foolish teachers who speak carelessly and irreverently about sacred things. Some seek attention, others novelty, and still others simply enjoy hearing themselves speak. Such men neither honour God nor edify His people.

But that is not the issue before us.

When faithful and godly ministers teach with reverence, clarity, and sound judgment, they may speak of these truths without danger and with great profit to those who hear them.

After all, do we not all confess that the Son of God was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary and born into this world as a true man?

Yet what is the human body but a frail and fallen thing?

Must we therefore refuse to speak of the incarnation because irreverent men can describe it in vulgar and offensive terms?

Certainly not.

The abuse of a truth is no argument against the truth itself.

Likewise, Christ possessed a real human body like our own. Scripture teaches that:

"All the fulness of the Godhead dwelt bodily" in Him. (Colossians 2:9)

Should we refuse to proclaim this because some may mock it?

Again, what is more dreadful than death?

What is more terrifying than the grave?

Yet Scripture declares that God was present even there, and that He did not abandon His Holy One to corruption. (Psalm 16:10)

The godly heart is not offended by such truths.

Indeed, it finds comfort in them.

If God is truly present everywhere, then He is present not only in palaces and cathedrals but also in prisons, sickrooms, battlefields, and places of suffering.

Many of God's saints have called upon Him from such places and found Him near.

Were we to follow your reasoning, we would soon conclude that God may only be spoken of in respectable places and under pleasant circumstances.

But Scripture teaches the opposite.

"The heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain Him." (1 Kings 8:27)

God fills all things.

There is no place where His presence is absent and no circumstance beyond His reach.

Therefore, the problem is not with the doctrine itself but with those who refuse to receive it rightly.

As so often before, you seek to make our position appear absurd because you cannot overthrow it.

But ridicule is no substitute for argument.

The truth remains unchanged.

God is everywhere present, and faithful ministers need not be ashamed to teach what Scripture plainly declares.

Section XVII

Your example concerning confession and satisfaction reveals once again the careful balancing act that characterises your whole argument. Throughout this discussion, you proceed cautiously, seeking neither to offend the Pope openly nor to support my position too clearly. You attempt to walk a middle path, but in doing so you abandon both truth and conscience.

You argue that many people abuse the freedom of the Gospel and use it as an excuse for sinful living. Therefore, you suggest that compulsory confession and similar church regulations are useful because they place some restraint upon the common people.

At first glance this may appear reasonable, but it is profoundly mistaken.

What kind of theology is this?

Are souls to be governed by human laws which God Himself has not imposed?

Are consciences to be burdened where God has left them free?

The prophet Ezekiel condemned those who bound heavy burdens upon the people and hunted souls as though they were prey. Such tyranny does not produce true obedience; it merely creates fear and hypocrisy.

If your reasoning is correct, then every oppressive system of religious law could be justified simply because it restrains outward behaviour. By that standard, all the burdensome regulations of the Papacy become useful and beneficial.

But this is not the teaching of Scripture.

A faithful theologian teaches that civil authorities may restrain outward evil through lawful government. As Paul teaches in Romans 13, the magistrate bears the sword to punish wrongdoing and preserve order.

Yet the conscience is another matter entirely.

No man has authority to bind the conscience except God Himself.

Consciences are bound only by the Word of God.

Where God has not commanded, no pope, bishop, council, or church may impose an obligation as though it were divine law.

The tragedy of human traditions is that they accomplish the very opposite of what they promise.

Outwardly they may compel obedience.

Inwardly they produce resentment.

Instead of creating holiness, they create hypocrisy.

Instead of leading men to love God, they often provoke them to hatred.

Instead of bringing freedom, they bring bondage.

Thus the tyranny of human regulations burdens the body, troubles the conscience, and leaves the heart unchanged.

Men comply outwardly while remaining rebels inwardly.

This is not spiritual transformation.

It is merely religious performance.

For that reason, those who impose such burdens upon consciences act not as shepherds but as destroyers of souls. They multiply fears where God has given freedom and create guilt where God has pronounced liberty.

You commend these regulations because they appear to restrain sin.

But there is a far better way.

The Gospel changes the heart.

The Word of God teaches truth.

The Holy Spirit produces obedience.

These accomplish what human laws never can.

Human traditions may create hypocrites.

Only the grace of God creates Christians.

Section XVIII

You next introduce a series of illustrations intended to support your argument. You speak of diseases that are better endured than cured, such as leprosy, and you appeal to Paul's statement:

> "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient." (1 Corinthians 6:12)

From this you conclude that although certain truths may be lawful to teach, it is not always wise to proclaim them openly.

Yet once again, you fail to grasp the nature of the issue before us.

You speak as though this debate concerns some minor disagreement between two individuals, or some earthly matter of little consequence. You reason as though the preservation of public tranquillity were more important than the questions under discussion.

But this is no trivial dispute.

We are not discussing money, reputation, or political advantage.

We are discussing God.

We are discussing salvation.

We are discussing the Gospel itself.

We are discussing truths that are worth defending even at the cost of one's life.

If this matter seems insignificant to you, then it is because you have not understood what is at stake.

For my part, I would rather endure every earthly trouble than

surrender the truth of God.

Let the whole world be thrown into confusion if necessary.

Let kingdoms tremble.

Let men rage.

Let opposition arise from every side.

The truth of God is still worth defending.

If you cannot understand this, then leave those who can.

God has given some men the conviction that His truth is worth suffering for, and they must not abandon it merely because others prefer peace.

Do you imagine that I have endured so many dangers, endured so much hatred, faced so many enemies, and stood against so many threats merely for personal gain?

Certainly not.

I have not done so for wealth, for I possess none.

I have not done so for glory, for the world offers me little honour.

Nor have I done so for earthly security, for my life has never been secure.

I have endured these things because I am persuaded that the Word of God is true and worthy of defence.

Believe me, I feel the weight of conflict as deeply as anyone.

I am not made of stone.

I do not enjoy controversy for its own sake.

But when the choice is between temporary unrest and surrendering the truth of God, the decision is clear.

Better to endure turmoil for a season than to betray eternal truth.

Better to suffer for the Word of God than to purchase peace at the cost of conscience.

You advise us to yield for the sake of harmony.

Christ commands us to remain faithful for the sake of truth.

These are not the same thing.

The peace that is purchased by compromising God's Word is not true peace at all.

It is merely a temporary calm before a greater storm.

For where God's truth is silenced, souls perish.

And what profit is there in preserving outward peace if eternal realities are lost?

Therefore, I would rather endure every earthly disturbance than

abandon the Word of God.

For the Word of God is worth more than the approval of men, more than public tranquillity, and more than all the kingdoms of this world.

The truth of God must stand, even if the world itself should fall.

You speak as though the disturbances and divisions that arise from the preaching of God's Word are unexpected and undesirable. Yet this only shows that you have failed to observe what Scripture repeatedly teaches.

Wherever the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed, conflict follows.

Christ Himself declared:

"I came not to send peace, but a sword." (Matthew 10:34)

And again:

"I am come to send fire on the earth." (Luke 12:49)

The Apostle Paul speaks of his ministry being accompanied by tumults, afflictions, and opposition. (2 Corinthians 6:5)

The same truth is proclaimed throughout the Scriptures.

The Psalmist describes the nations raging, the peoples plotting in vain, the kings of the earth setting themselves against the Lord and against His Anointed. (Psalm 2)

Why is this so?

Because the Word of God confronts the world as it is.

It exposes sin.

It challenges human pride.

It overthrows false religion.

It tears down every refuge in which fallen man places his trust.

For that reason, the world does not welcome it.

Look at the ministry of the apostles.

The Book of Acts records that wherever Paul preached, opposition followed. Cities were stirred into uproar. Religious leaders became enraged. Crowds were divided. His enemies themselves accused him of turning the world upside down.

Was this because Paul sought controversy?

No.

It was because the truth of God collided with the falsehoods of men.

The same was true of the prophets.

Elijah was accused of troubling Israel.

The other prophets were mocked, persecuted, imprisoned, stoned,

and slain.

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah were shaken by their message.

Was this because they loved disorder?

Certainly not.

It was because the Word of God exposed the sins of the nation.

The world cannot tolerate the truth for long.

Nor should we expect it to.

The god of this world opposes the God of heaven.

The kingdom of darkness opposes the kingdom of Christ.

As long as these two kingdoms remain at war, there can be no lasting peace between them.

Therefore, to demand the removal of every disturbance caused by the Word of God is really to demand the removal of the Word itself.

For wherever God's truth advances, it challenges error.

Wherever light shines, darkness is exposed.

Wherever Christ reigns, rival authorities are threatened.

This has always been the pattern throughout history.

The Christian, therefore, must not be surprised when conflict arises because of the Gospel.

Christ warned us beforehand.

"When ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, be not troubled." (Matthew 24:6)

These things are not signs that the Word has failed.

They are often signs that the Word is accomplishing exactly what God intended.

Indeed, if I saw no opposition to the Gospel, I would be more inclined to doubt whether it was being faithfully proclaimed.

For throughout history, the Word of God has always provoked resistance from those who hate it.

Far from discouraging me, such opposition strengthens my confidence that God's truth is at work.

I do not rejoice in conflict for its own sake.

I take no pleasure in disorder.

But I rejoice whenever the Word of God advances, even when that advance exposes error and provokes resistance.

The kingdom of Satan cannot stand forever.

The false systems that oppose Christ will fall.

The Word of God will remain.

For this reason, I do not fear the tumults that accompany the Gospel.

They are temporary.

The victory of Christ is certain.

The disturbances of this present age are but passing storms.

Compared with the eternal realities that await us, they are no more than the whisper of a breeze or the murmur of a shallow stream.

Therefore, let the Word of God run its course.

Let it expose error.

Let it awaken sinners.

Let it overthrow false confidence.

For the peace purchased at the expense of truth is no peace at all.

But the truth of God, though it may bring conflict for a season, leads ultimately to everlasting peace.

Section XIX

You speak in this way because you either have not read carefully, or have failed to observe, that wherever the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed, turmoil and division inevitably follow.

Christ Himself plainly declared:

"Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword."

— Matthew 10:34

And again:

"I am come to send fire on the earth."

— Luke 12:49

Likewise, Paul speaks of his ministry being accompanied by "tumults" and disturbances (2 Corinthians 6:5).

The same truth is proclaimed in the Second Psalm, where the nations rage, the people imagine vain things, kings set themselves against the Lord, and rulers unite against His Anointed. The meaning is clear: all that the world values—its numbers, power, wealth, wisdom, influence, and righteousness—rises up in opposition to the Word of God.

Consider the Book of Acts and observe what happened through the preaching of Paul alone, not to mention the other apostles. Everywhere he went, both Jews and Gentiles were stirred into commotion. His enemies described him as one who had "turned the world upside down."

The same was true in the days of Elijah. King Ahab accused him

of troubling Israel. The other prophets suffered similarly. Many were killed, others stoned, and still others persecuted without mercy. Israel was carried away into Assyria and Judah into Babylon. Was this peace?

The truth is that the world and its god cannot endure the Word of the true God, and the true God will not remain silent. Since these two kingdoms are at war, what can result but conflict and upheaval?

To wish for the removal of such disturbances is really to wish for the removal of the Word of God itself. Wherever God's Word comes, it comes to reform, renew, and overturn what is opposed to Him. Such change can never occur without resistance.

Even pagan writers recognised that great changes in nations and societies are never accomplished without turmoil, conflict, and often bloodshed.

Christians, therefore, should not be surprised by such things. Rather, they should expect them and endure them with steadfast hearts. Our Lord Himself said:

"And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet."

— Matthew 24:6

Indeed, if I saw no disturbance arising from the preaching of God's Word, I would be inclined to conclude that the Word of God was not truly at work. But because I do see these conflicts, I rejoice rather than fear. For I am persuaded that the kingdom of the Pope and all who oppose the truth must eventually fall, since it is chiefly against that kingdom that the Word of God now advances.

I know, Erasmus, that in many of your writings you lament these divisions and long for peace and harmony. I am willing to believe that your intentions are sincere. Yet your remedies are powerless because they address the wrong problem.

You are attempting to heal with remedies that cannot cure the disease. Indeed, you are trying to extinguish a fire with straw.

Therefore, cease your complaints and abandon these futile remedies. This conflict has its origin from above. It is directed by God Himself and will not cease until all the enemies of His Word are brought low.

I am sorry that I must instruct so distinguished a theologian in matters that ought already to be familiar to him. Yet the truth requires it.

You have rightly observed that some diseases are better endured than cured. That principle applies here, though not in the way you intend.

The real disease is not the outward turmoil, but the corruption and blindness that destroy souls. The disturbances caused by the Word of God are temporary. The spiritual ruin caused by falsehood is eternal.

Far better that nations be shaken and kingdoms disturbed than that souls perish forever. If the Word of God is removed in order to preserve outward peace, then God Himself, Christ, the Gospel, and the hope of salvation are removed with it.

What are all the kingdoms of this world when compared with eternal life?

Would it not be better for the whole world to perish than for a single soul to be lost eternally? No soul can be redeemed by all the wealth, power, and glory of the world combined.

You possess a gift for elegant illustrations and memorable sayings. Yet when dealing with divine matters, you often apply them in a manner that is too earthly and human. You look only at temporal consequences and fail to rise to the higher purposes of God.

The works of God are not governed by human wisdom. They are divine, and therefore they transcend human understanding.

You see these conflicts and fear that the world is falling apart. I see them and recognise the hand of God at work. Indeed, greater upheavals still lie ahead according to His purpose. Compared with those future events, the tumults of our own day are no more than the whisper of a breeze or the gentle murmur of a brook.

Section XX

You either deny, or fail to understand, that the doctrine of Christian liberty rests upon the very Word of God itself.

We know and are fully persuaded that God has revealed in His Word a liberty by which Christians are freed from the bondage of human traditions and man-made laws. I have written extensively on this subject elsewhere and am prepared to defend it whenever necessary.

You suggest, however, that the laws and traditions imposed by the Popes may still be observed in a spirit of charity, so that the peace of society may be preserved while the Gospel is maintained.

But this is impossible.

The kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of human tradition cannot peacefully coexist when the latter seeks to bind the conscience.

The ruler of this world will not permit men to observe papal laws in true liberty. His purpose is always to ensnare consciences and bring them into bondage.

Yet God will not tolerate such bondage.

Therefore, the Word of God and the traditions of men stand in irreconcilable opposition.

They are opposed to one another just as God and Satan are opposed to one another.

Each destroys the works of the other.

Each overturns the claims of the other.

Christ Himself said:

"He that is not with me is against me." (Luke 11:23)

There can be no lasting compromise between truth and falsehood.

You are concerned that wicked men may abuse the liberty proclaimed in the Gospel.

I readily acknowledge that some will.

But this belongs to those temporary evils that must be endured in a fallen world.

The abuse of a blessing does not invalidate the blessing itself.

The possibility that some will misuse Christian liberty is no reason to suppress the Word of God.

If all men do not receive the truth rightly, nevertheless some do.

And it is for those people that the Gospel is preached.

Indeed, those who truly understand the grace of God value Christian liberty all the more because they recognise it as a gift purchased by Christ Himself.

Moreover, was the world any less wicked before the Gospel was preached?

Were men peaceful, righteous, and holy before they heard the truth?

Certainly not.

The world has always been filled with violence, corruption, deceit, pride, and every form of evil.

The Gospel did not create these things.

It merely exposed them.

Before the light came, men sinned in darkness.

Now that the Gospel shines, their wickedness becomes visible.

And because their sin is revealed, they blame the Gospel itself.

This is no different from ignorant men blaming education because

learning exposes their ignorance.

The Gospel uncovers what was already there.

It does not create the evil it reveals.

The same objection was raised in the days of the apostles.

When the Gospel proclaimed freedom from the ceremonial law of Moses, many feared that such liberty would encourage wickedness.

Yet the apostles did not suppress the truth.

They continued to preach it boldly.

The ungodly were left to abuse it if they chose, while believers were taught:

> "Use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13)

The answer to abuse is not the suppression of truth.

The answer is the faithful teaching of truth.

For Christian liberty is not the enemy of holiness.

It is one of the fruits of the Gospel itself.

Section XXI

Your next piece of advice is no better than the last. You say that although it is lawful to speak the truth, it is not always expedient to do so before every person, at every time, and in every manner.

To support your argument, you appeal to Paul's words:

> "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient." (1 Corinthians 6:12)

But you have completely misunderstood the passage.

Paul is not speaking about the proclamation of divine truth. He is speaking about matters of Christian conduct and the use of Christian liberty.

When it comes to the truth of God, Paul teaches the exact opposite of what you suggest.

He rejoices whenever Christ is preached, even when some proclaim Him from envy or selfish motives.

> "What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice." (Philippians 1:18)

The truth of God is never to be concealed.

It is never to be hidden.

It is never to be withheld because some may dislike it.

The Gospel is to be proclaimed openly, faithfully, and without compromise.

Paul's concern in the passage you quote is with actions that may unnecessarily wound weak consciences. He is not suggesting that God's truth should be adjusted according to the preferences of men.

Truth is not a matter of convenience.

It is not subject to the approval of rulers, church leaders, or public opinion.

Who gave you the authority to decide when, where, or to whom God's truth may be proclaimed?

Christ did not say:

"Go into selected places and preach only to those who are willing to hear."

He said:

"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15)

The command is universal.

The Gospel belongs to no particular class of people.

It is not restricted by nationality, social standing, political power, or religious position.

The Word of God is not bound.

As Paul wrote:

"The word of God is not bound." (2 Timothy 2:9)

Yet your advice would place it in chains.

You would have us consider persons, places, customs, and circumstances before speaking plainly.

But the glory of the Gospel lies precisely in the fact that it shows no partiality.

God is no respecter of persons, and His Word is not to be governed by human preferences.

Indeed, if we followed your counsel consistently, we would never finish deciding when the truth should be spoken.

Who could possibly determine the perfect time?

Who could know every circumstance?

Who could read every heart?

Even if such knowledge were possible, it belongs to God alone.

He knows every heart.

He knows every situation.

He knows what each person needs to hear and when they need to hear it.

Therefore, the responsibility for governing the spread of His Word belongs to Him, not to us.

God has determined that His Gospel should be proclaimed freely, openly, and universally.

It is not to be confined to certain places.

It is not to be reserved for certain people.

It is not to be postponed until more favourable circumstances arise.

The truths revealed in Scripture are plain, profitable, and necessary for salvation.

For that reason they must be proclaimed abroad.

This was a conviction you yourself once defended more strongly than you do now.

Yet here you seem willing to aid those who wish to silence the Gospel.

The Pope and his supporters would gladly bind the Word of God and keep men from hearing the truth.

By this advice, whether intentionally or not, you lend support to their cause.

But the Gospel was not given to be hidden.

It was given to be preached.

And wherever God opens a door, His servants must speak it boldly and without fear.

Section XXII

The Authority Of Scripture And The Duty Of Speaking The Truth

Your next piece of advice is of the same kind.

You suggest that if a church council has made an error, it should not be openly acknowledged, lest the authority of the Fathers and the councils be weakened in the eyes of the people.

No doubt this is the kind of counsel that greatly pleases the Pope and those whose power depends upon unquestioning submission to ecclesiastical authority.

But what of the souls that remain bound by false teaching?

What of those whose consciences are burdened by laws and traditions that have no foundation in the Word of God?

Do these count for nothing?

Once again, you assume that human regulations can coexist peacefully alongside the Gospel. You imagine that church traditions may continue to bind consciences without doing harm.

But this is impossible.

The Word of God sets the conscience free.

Human traditions bind it.

The two are fundamentally opposed to one another.

They stand in the same relationship as light and darkness, truth and falsehood, freedom and bondage.

The Gospel declares liberty where Christ has made His people free.

Human traditions impose obligations where God has imposed none.

One liberates.

The other enslaves.

Therefore, whenever human authority seeks to bind the conscience beyond the teaching of Scripture, it must yield to the authority of God.

This is not a small matter.

The entire power of the papal system rests upon the ability to impose obligations upon consciences and to present human decrees as though they were divine commands.

If men discover that such regulations possess no authority apart from the Word of God, that system begins to crumble.

This is why those who depend upon human authority fear the free proclamation of Scripture.

The authority of the Fathers, valuable though it may be, is not absolute.

Church councils may err.

Great teachers may err.

Ancient traditions may err.

Only the Word of God cannot err.

Therefore, when any council, tradition, or ecclesiastical decree conflicts with Scripture, it is Scripture that must prevail.

Christ is greater than the Fathers.

The Word of God is greater than councils.

The authority of heaven is greater than the authority of men.

For that reason, any law, decree, or tradition that cannot be supported by Scripture must be abandoned, regardless of how ancient, respected,

or widely accepted it may be.

We honour the Fathers where they agree with God's Word.

We learn from them where they teach faithfully.

But we do not place them above Scripture.

Nor do we permit their authority to silence the truth.

The real issue is not whether the Fathers deserve respect.

The real issue is whether God has spoken.

And where God has spoken, every other authority must submit.

For the Church is built upon the Word of God, not the Word of God upon the Church.

Therefore, no appeal to tradition, councils, or ancient custom can justify the suppression of truth.

The conscience belongs to God alone.

And it must never be bound by anything that He has not commanded.

Section XXIII

In the final part of your Preface, Erasmus, you seem to believe that you have at last found the decisive argument against our position.

You ask what could be more harmful than openly teaching that all things occur according to God's sovereign purpose, and that man does not possess the freedom that many imagine he has. You fear that such doctrines will encourage carelessness, discourage moral effort, and open the floodgates to wickedness.

You ask:

Who will seek to improve his life?

Who will strive against sin?

Who will believe that God loves him?

Who will fight against the desires of the flesh?

These objections may appear persuasive, but they rest upon a false foundation.

First, if these doctrines are merely human inventions, why are you so disturbed by them?

Why devote so much effort to opposing them?

Why not simply dismiss them and move on?

But if they are the Word of God, then the matter is entirely different.

For if these truths come from God, who are we to decide whether they are useful or harmful?

Shall the creature instruct the Creator?

Shall man determine what God ought or ought not to reveal?

Shall we sit in judgment upon divine wisdom?

Such a position is both arrogant and dangerous.

God does not require our permission before He speaks.

Nor does He consult us concerning what truths are fit to be proclaimed.

What He has revealed, He has revealed because He deemed it necessary.

What He has spoken, He has spoken wisely.

Our duty is not to correct Him but to believe Him.

The Apostle Paul teaches these same doctrines openly and without apology.

He declares:

> "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth." (Romans 9:18)

And again:

> "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction." (Romans 9:22)

Christ Himself says:

> "Many are called, but few are chosen." (Matthew 22:14)

And again:

> "I know whom I have chosen." (John 13:18)

These are not hidden statements.

They are not whispered in secret.

They are proclaimed openly in Holy Scripture for all to read.

According to your reasoning, however, such doctrines should never be preached because they might trouble the ungodly or provoke sinful reactions.

But if that principle were applied consistently, much of Scripture would have to be silenced.

The problem does not lie with God's Word.

The problem lies with the sinful heart of man.

Whenever divine truth exposes human pride, fallen men complain.

Whenever God's sovereignty is proclaimed, rebellious hearts object.

Whenever grace is exalted, self-righteousness is offended.

Yet none of this proves that the doctrine is false.

It merely proves that man's heart is opposed to God.

Indeed, your argument seems to measure the truth of a doctrine by the reaction it produces in sinful men.

If they approve of it, it is deemed useful.

If they dislike it, it is deemed dangerous.

But Scripture teaches the exact opposite.

God's truth does not depend upon the approval of men.

It remains true whether men embrace it or reject it.

The authority of God's Word stands above every human opinion.

As the prophet declares:

"Let all the earth keep silence before him." (Habakkuk 2:20)

Therefore, we must not ask whether a doctrine pleases fallen man.

We must ask whether it is taught by God.

If God has spoken, that settles the matter.

What He reveals is true.

What He commands must be proclaimed.

And what He has chosen to make known must never be concealed because sinful men find it offensive.

Indeed, there is an inconsistency in your argument that cannot be overlooked.

Earlier you urged us to reverence the hidden mysteries of God and not pry into those things He has not revealed.

Yet now, when confronted with God's sovereign dealings and eternal purposes, you demand explanations for why He acts as He does.

You object because you cannot fully understand His ways.

But this is precisely where humility is required.

There are secret things that belong to God alone.

There are depths in the divine counsel that no human mind can fully penetrate.

When we reach those limits, our duty is not to accuse God but to worship Him.

It is here that we must place our hands upon our mouths and confess with the Apostle:

"Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?"
(Romans 9:20)

The proper response to God's sovereignty is not complaint, but reverence.

Not rebellion, but submission.

Not accusation, but adoration.

For God is righteous in all His ways, even when His purposes exceed our understanding.

Section XXIV

The Necessity Of Divine Sovereignty

You ask:

"Who will endeavour to amend his life?"

I answer: no one can amend his life by his own power.

Those who attempt to reform themselves apart from the Spirit of God may appear righteous before men, but before God they remain hypocrites. True spiritual renewal is the work of the Holy Spirit alone.

Yet this does not mean that no one will be changed.

God's elect will be renewed.

Those who fear Him will be transformed by His grace.

The rest will remain as they are and perish in their unbelief.

You ask again:

"Who will believe that he is loved by God?"

I answer: no man can believe this of himself.

Faith is not produced by human effort, nor does it arise from natural ability.

The elect will believe because God grants them faith.

Others will continue in unbelief, resisting His truth and speaking against it.

You further object that these doctrines open the floodgates of wickedness.

Let us suppose, for argument's sake, that some misuse them.

Even then, the same doctrines open a far greater gate—a gate leading to righteousness, salvation, and eternal life for those whom God teaches.

Your proposal is far more dangerous.

You would have us remain silent concerning these truths so that men may continue in a false confidence concerning themselves. You would leave them ignorant of their helpless condition and unwilling to confront

the reality of their need.

But how can a man seek grace until he knows he needs it?

How can he be healed until he knows he is sick?

How can he flee to Christ until he has despaired of saving himself?

If we conceal these doctrines, we do not shut the door to wickedness.

We open the door to pride.

We encourage self-righteousness.

We strengthen the delusion that man can contribute something to his own salvation.

In doing so, we not only hinder men from entering the kingdom ourselves, but also hinder those who would otherwise enter.

You ask:

"What necessity is there to proclaim these things openly when so many evils appear likely to result from them?"

My first answer is simple.

God has commanded that they be proclaimed.

That alone is sufficient.

The reasons for God's commands are not for us to judge but to reverence.

He is wise.

He is righteous.

He does nothing foolishly or unjustly.

The believer is content with that answer.

Yet there is more to be said.

These truths must be preached for two great reasons.

The first is the humbling of human pride and the revelation of divine grace.

God has promised grace to the humble.

But no man is truly humbled while he imagines that he can contribute something toward his own salvation.

As long as he believes there remains within him some ability, some strength, some power to save himself, he continues to trust in himself.

He has not yet despaired of himself.

He has not yet been brought low before God.

But when a man sees that his salvation depends entirely upon God's will, God's purpose, and God's work, he abandons all confidence in himself.

He ceases striving to save himself.

He waits upon God alone.

Such a man is prepared to receive grace.

For this reason these doctrines are preached.

They strip man of pride so that he may be clothed with Christ.

The second reason concerns faith itself.

Faith concerns things that are not seen.

Therefore, God often hides His work beneath its opposite.

When He gives life, He first brings death.

When He justifies, He first condemns.

When He exalts, He first humbles.

As Scripture declares:

> "The Lord killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up." (1 Samuel 2:6)

Thus God conceals His mercy beneath apparent wrath.

He hides His favour beneath suffering.

He veils His grace beneath circumstances that seem to deny it.

This is where faith is exercised.

The highest act of faith is to trust God when everything visible appears to contradict His promises.

It is to believe Him merciful when His providence appears severe.

It is to believe Him righteous when His ways are beyond our understanding.

If we could fully comprehend all God's purposes, there would be no need for faith.

Faith exists precisely because God's wisdom exceeds our understanding.

Therefore, these truths must not be hidden.

They must be proclaimed.

For through them God humbles the proud, reveals His grace, strengthens faith, and leads His people to trust Him beyond what they can see or understand.

Section XXV

Let us now consider another of the so-called paradoxes that troubles you—namely, the statement that whatever we do is done, not by Free Will, but by necessity.

This point must not be passed over, lest any harmful misunderstanding

remain unanswered.

If it can be shown—as I trust it shall be throughout this discussion—that our salvation depends entirely upon the work of God and not upon our own strength, wisdom, or efforts, then it necessarily follows that apart from God's work within us, everything we do is spiritually worthless. If God alone accomplishes salvation in us, then before He begins that work, we can do nothing that contributes toward it.

When I speak of necessity, however, I do not mean compulsion. I mean what may be called the necessity of immutability, not the necessity of force.

A person without the Spirit of God does not commit evil unwillingly, as though dragged against his will or forced by violence. He sins willingly, eagerly, and from the desire of his own heart. His will is inclined toward evil and delights in it.

Nor can he, by his own power, abandon that inclination, restrain it, or transform it. Even when outwardly compelled to act otherwise, the inward desire remains unchanged. Indeed, the more it is resisted, the more it resents the restraint.

This is what we mean by the necessity of immutability. The will cannot change its own nature or redirect its own desires. Instead, it continues to pursue what it loves. The very fact that it becomes irritated when opposed demonstrates that it is not free. If it truly possessed Free Will, it could change itself at pleasure.

Experience confirms this. Observe those whose hearts are firmly set upon some object of desire. They do not abandon it willingly. If they change at all, it is because of force, fear, or the attraction of something they value more highly. Left to themselves, they continue in the course they have chosen.

The opposite is true when God works within a person.

When the Holy Spirit renews the heart, the will is transformed. It begins to desire what is good, not through compulsion, but willingly, gladly, and in harmony with God's purposes. It acts freely because it has been set free.

Nor can such a will be easily turned aside. Though opposed by the world, the flesh, and the devil, it continues to love and pursue that which is good, just as formerly it loved and pursued that which was evil.

Again, experience proves this to be true. Consider the steadfastness of the saints. The more they are persecuted, the more firmly they cling to

the truth. Like a fire fanned by the wind, their zeal often grows stronger under opposition rather than weaker.

Thus, in both conditions, there is no such thing as an independent Free Will directing itself wherever it chooses. Whether under the dominion of sin or under the influence of grace, the will follows the master who governs it.

As Paul writes:

"Taken captive by him at his will."

— 2 Timothy 2:26

Without the Spirit of God, we are held captive by the prince of this world and can desire only what he desires. Satan is the strong man armed who keeps his house secure. Those whom he holds captive remain at peace under his rule, for if they began to resist him, his kingdom would be divided against itself.

Yet all this captivity is voluntary. Men serve sin willingly because their wills are inclined toward it.

But when Christ, who is stronger than Satan, comes and overthrows him, He claims His captives as His own. Through the Spirit, believers become servants of Christ—a bondage that is, in reality, true freedom. For they now delight to do what God wills.

The human will, therefore, may be compared to a beast standing between two riders.

If God rides it, it goes where God wills.

As the Psalmist says:

"I was as a beast before thee. Nevertheless I am continually with thee."

— Psalm 73:22–23

If Satan rides it, it goes where Satan wills.

The beast does not choose its rider. It is not free to decide who shall govern it. Rather, the riders contend for possession of it.

So it is with the human will.

Section XXVI

Now let us see what follows from your own definition of Free Will.

What if I were able to prove, from your own words, that there is no such thing as Free Will at all? What if it could be shown that, while attempting to defend it, you actually undermine and destroy it yourself?

If I fail to do so, then I am willing for everything I have written against

you in this book to be withdrawn, and for all that your Diatribe seeks to establish to be regarded as confirmed.

You define Free Will as a certain small degree of power which, apart from the grace of God, is entirely ineffective.

Do you not admit this?

If so, I ask you: if the grace of God is absent, what can this supposed power accomplish by itself?

Your answer is clear. It can do nothing good.

If it can do nothing good, then it cannot do what God wills. For whatever does not proceed from the grace of God cannot be regarded as good in His sight.

Therefore, by your own admission, Free Will without grace cannot turn itself toward good. It follows that it is not free at all, but is the servant and slave of evil.

Once this is established, I am content for you to enlarge this power as much as you please. Call it a great power rather than a small one. Call it evangelical, or even divine if you wish. It makes no difference, provided you continue to confess that without the grace of God it is ineffective.

For an ineffective power is, in reality, no power at all.

To say that the will is free, and yet unable to do what is good, is a contradiction in terms. It is as absurd as calling fire cold or ice hot.

Suppose someone claimed that fire possessed all the properties of fire, even the heat of a furnace, yet never burned, warmed, or scorched anything. Would we still call it fire? Certainly not.

Likewise, if Free Will possesses the power to do good but never actually can do good without grace, then what sort of freedom is it?

At most, we may admit that man possesses a certain capacity to be acted upon by God. He may be capable of receiving grace, just as a creature made for eternal life or eternal death may be fitted to receive what God ordains.

This passive capacity I willingly acknowledge. The Schoolmen speak of it as a disposition or aptitude. Such a capacity belongs to man, but not to stones, trees, or beasts.

Yet this is a very different thing from the freedom that your terminology suggests.

Thus, by your own definition, the conclusion stands firm: we do all things by necessity and not by Free Will. For what you call Free Will neither does good nor can do good without grace.

Unless, perhaps, you intend the word ineffective to mean something entirely different—namely, that the will can begin a good work but cannot complete it. But I do not believe this is what you mean, and we shall examine that possibility later.

The truth is that the term Free Will properly belongs to God alone.

Scripture declares:

"Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth."

— Psalm 135:6

God alone possesses a will that is absolutely free and unrestricted.

When this same term is applied to man, it attributes to him something that belongs exclusively to God. Indeed, it comes dangerously close to ascribing divinity itself to man.

For this reason, theologians would do well to abandon the term altogether when speaking of human ability and reserve it for God alone.

If they insist on assigning some power to man, let them use another expression.

The phrase Free Will is far too grand and misleading. Ordinary people naturally understand it to mean a power that can direct itself wherever it chooses, independent of all external control.

Yet theologians themselves admit that this is not what they mean.

What confusion, then, is created when one thing is said and another intended?

The common people hear the words and imagine a freedom that does not exist. They suppose that man possesses an independent power to choose good or evil at pleasure. Meanwhile, the theologians quietly explain that by Free Will they actually mean a tiny and ineffective capacity that can accomplish nothing without grace.

It is hardly surprising that people are misled.

The term promises far more than the doctrine delivers.

Why, then, continue using a word that deceives those who hear it?

To cling to an empty title when the reality is absent is mere vanity. Kings sometimes boast of kingdoms they do not possess, but at least no one's eternal salvation depends upon such pretence.

This matter is far more serious.

Imagine someone deciding that the word beggar should mean wealthy man, not because the beggar possesses riches, but because a king might one day give them to him.

Or suppose someone insisted on calling a dying man healthy because

a physician might eventually restore him.

Such language would rightly be considered absurd.

Yet this is precisely what is done when man is said to possess Free Will merely because God may one day grant him grace.

This is not careful theology. It is confusion.

Words should be used according to their proper meaning. They should be clear, honest, and understandable.

As Paul instructs us, our speech should be sound and beyond reproach.

If, however, we choose to retain the term Free Will, let it be used in a very limited sense. Man may be said to possess freedom in matters beneath him—in the ordinary affairs of this life. He may buy and sell, work and rest, speak and remain silent, according to his own choice.

Yet even here his freedom remains under the sovereign rule of God.

But in matters concerning salvation, condemnation, righteousness, and the things of God, man possesses no Free Will whatsoever.

In such matters he is either the servant of God or the servant of Satan.

Section XXVII

These observations conclude my reply to the main points raised in your Preface. In truth, they address the heart of the matter more directly than much of what follows in your book.

Indeed, all that I have said could have been reduced to one simple answer.

Your Preface is directed either against the words of men or against the Word of God.

If it is directed against the words of men, then your entire complaint is unnecessary, for we are not concerned with human opinions. But if it is directed against the Word of God, then your complaint is not merely mistaken but irreverent.

It would have saved much confusion had you plainly stated from the beginning whether your objections were aimed at human assertions or at the testimony of Holy Scripture. Perhaps this distinction will become clearer in the introduction that follows or in the course of the discussion itself.

As for the concluding remarks of your Preface, they carry little weight.

You speak of my teachings as though they were useless speculations

and empty fables. You suggest that we ought simply to preach Christ crucified, following the example of the Apostle Paul. You remind us that wisdom is spoken among those who are mature in faith, that Scripture adapts its language to different hearers, and that teachers ought to consider what is most profitable for their neighbours.

Yet none of these observations touch the question before us.

For no one preaches Christ crucified more earnestly than we do. Indeed, Christ crucified includes all the doctrines that you would separate from Him. The wisdom spoken of among the mature is not some wisdom other than Christ, but the mystery of Christ Himself.

There is no Christian wisdom apart from the wisdom hidden in the Gospel.

The Apostle teaches that this wisdom belongs to those who are spiritually mature, not to those who trust in their own righteousness and boast in their works.

Unless, of course, by preaching Christ crucified you mean merely repeating the words, "Christ was crucified," without teaching the truths that flow from His death and resurrection.

If that is your meaning, then you have reduced the Gospel to a mere phrase.

You also object that Scripture sometimes speaks of God as being angry, grieving, repenting, pitying, or hating, even though such passions do not exist in God in the same manner that they exist in men.

But what has this to do with our present discussion?

These expressions do not make Scripture obscure. Nor do they require us to adapt or dilute its teaching. They are ordinary figures of speech, familiar even to schoolboys who have learned the basic rules of grammar.

The difficulty does not lie in the language itself but in the unwillingness of men to accept the truths being taught.

Our present dispute concerns doctrine, not grammar.

We are not debating rhetorical figures or forms of expression. We are discussing the truth of God and the salvation of men.

Therefore, such objections do nothing to advance your case.

The real question remains exactly where it stood at the beginning: what does Scripture teach concerning the human will, the grace of God, and the sovereign working of God in salvation?

It is to that question that we must now turn.

DISCUSSION PART ONE
Exortium

Section XXVIII

At the beginning of your argument, Erasmus, you promise to proceed according to the authority of the Holy Scriptures. I gladly accept that promise.

Indeed, you have little choice.

You know very well that I am persuaded by no authority that stands above the Word of God. Therefore, if this dispute is to be settled, it must be settled by Scripture.

Yet it is clear that you are not entirely satisfied with this approach.

You remind us of the vast company that stands on your side: learned scholars, ancient theologians, councils, bishops, popes, martyrs, saints, and generations of respected teachers. You place before us the weight of centuries and the authority of the Church.

By contrast, you present my side as small and insignificant.

You describe Luther as a solitary individual standing against the wisdom of ages.

You suggest that I possess neither the learning, authority, sanctity, miracles, nor reputation that adorn the names of those who have gone before.

I freely acknowledge that such arguments once carried great weight with me.

For many years I stood where you now stand.

I too found it difficult to believe that a structure so ancient, so powerful, and so widely respected could be mistaken.

I thought it impossible that so many generations should have erred.

Indeed, I confess before God that nothing but the force of Scripture and the testimony of conscience could ever have compelled me to leave that position.

The struggle was not easy.

I knew that if I persisted, I would find myself opposed by nearly every authority recognised in Christendom.

I knew that the weight of tradition would be brought against me.

I knew that the judgment of the world would fall heavily upon my head.

Yet conscience would not permit me to remain silent.

The question before us is not how many people believe a thing.

Nor is it how long it has been believed.

The question is whether it is true.

Truth is not determined by numbers.

Neither is it established by age.

Error can be ancient.

Falsehood can be popular.

A multitude may be mistaken.

The history of Israel proves this repeatedly.

The prophets often stood alone against priests, kings, and nations.

Yet it was the prophets, not the multitude, who possessed the truth.

Therefore, while I honour faithful teachers of the past, I refuse to place any man, however revered, upon a throne that belongs to Scripture alone.

The Word of God must judge all men.

No man, council, church, or age may judge the Word of God.

For Scripture stands above them all.

If a doctrine cannot be established by Scripture, it matters little how many authorities are summoned to defend it.

The truth of God does not depend upon human approval.

It stands by its own authority.

And it is upon that authority alone that this debate must rest.

Section XXIX

The Authority Of Scripture

Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that all the men you have mentioned were saints.

Let us grant that they possessed great wisdom.

Let us grant that they were filled with the Spirit of God.

Let us grant even that they performed miracles.

What then?

Were any of these things given to confirm the doctrine of Free Will?

Did God grant miracles to establish the power of human choice?

Did the Holy Spirit descend to exalt the abilities of fallen man?

Certainly not.

Every miracle, every gift of the Spirit, every act of divine power was given to magnify Christ and confirm the Gospel.

The miracles of the saints belong to Christ.

Their holiness belongs to Christ.

Their faith belongs to Christ.

Their usefulness belongs to Christ.

None of these things prove the doctrine of Free Will.

At most they prove the truth of Christianity itself.

Therefore, your appeal to miracles and sanctity accomplishes nothing.

Even godly men may speak incorrectly.

The apostles themselves were not immune from weakness and error.

At times they spoke according to the flesh rather than according to the Spirit.

Why then should we be surprised if later teachers occasionally did the same?

If any of the fathers spoke in favour of Free Will, that fact alone proves nothing.

The question remains:

Did they speak according to Scripture?

For neither sanctity nor miracles make a doctrine true.

Truth is determined by the Word of God alone.

Indeed, if you wish to establish the doctrine of Free Will, then the burden of proof rests upon you.

You are making the assertion.

You must therefore provide the evidence.

Where are the miracles performed in the name of Free Will?

Where are the signs from heaven confirming its power?

Where are the testimonies of Scripture establishing its claims?

You appeal to authority.

I appeal to evidence.

You appeal to reputation.

I appeal to God's Word.

The two are not the same.

For God has never commanded us to believe a doctrine merely because respected men have taught it.

He commands us to test all things by His revealed truth.

And when we do so, we find that the glory belongs not to human ability but to divine grace.

The saints point us to Christ.

The miracles point us to Christ.

The Scriptures point us to Christ.

None of them point us to Free Will.

Therefore, if Free Will is to be believed, it must be proved from Scripture.

Until that proof is supplied, appeals to saints, miracles, and church authorities remain entirely beside the point.

Section XXX

The Empty Claim Of Free Will

I can easily demonstrate the weakness of your position.

Consider those very saints whose authority you constantly invoke. Whenever they came before God in prayer, worship, repentance, or service, they did not rely upon Free Will. They came as helpless sinners seeking mercy.

Augustine did so repeatedly.

Bernard did likewise, and near the end of his life confessed:

"I have lost my time, because I have lived wrongly."

Such words do not arise from confidence in human ability.

They arise from a deep awareness of personal unworthiness and complete dependence upon divine grace.

Indeed, I have often observed that men speak one way in debate and another way in prayer.

When disputing, they defend human ability.

When praying, they abandon it.

When arguing, they praise Free Will.

When standing before God, they cry for mercy.

Experience reveals what controversy often conceals.

Men may speak proudly before one another, but before God they confess their poverty.

Therefore, let us leave aside appeals to saints, miracles, and reputation.

Let us come directly to the doctrine itself.

Tell us plainly:

What does Free Will actually do?

What action does it perform?

What movement does it make toward grace?

What work can it accomplish?

It is not enough simply to repeat:

"There is a power of Free Will."

That proves nothing.

The question remains:

What does this power actually do?

Does it pray?

Does it fast?

Does it seek God?

Does it prepare itself for grace?

Does it perform some act that God rewards?

If so, tell us precisely what that act is.

Define it clearly.

Explain it plainly.

Yet here your position becomes silent.

You speak much about Free Will, but you never explain what it is able to accomplish.

You affirm its existence but provide no evidence of its operation.

Even those who defend it cannot agree among themselves concerning its nature.

Some define it one way.

Others define it another.

One contradicts another.

And all remain uncertain.

How then can a doctrine be established when its defenders cannot even explain what they are defending?

You ask us to believe in a power that cannot be described, demonstrated, or proved.

Such a demand is unreasonable.

The burden of proof lies upon those who make the assertion.

You say there is a power of Free Will.

Very well.

Show us what it does.

Show us a single act performed by its strength.

Show us one movement toward God that proceeds from it.

Show us one sinner brought nearer to grace through its operation.

Until that is done, your doctrine remains an empty sound—a name without substance, a claim without proof.

And consciences redeemed by the blood of Christ ought not to be burdened by mere words that no one can adequately explain.

A doctrine that cannot be defined cannot be trusted.

And a doctrine that cannot be proved ought not to be imposed upon the Church of God.

Section XXXI

And here, Erasmus, I must remind you of your own advice.

You urged that questions of this kind should be set aside, and that we should rather devote ourselves to Christ crucified and to those truths which are sufficient for Christian godliness. Yet that is precisely what we are attempting to do.

What is the purpose of our present dispute if not to preserve the simplicity and purity of Christian doctrine, and to remove those inventions which men have attached to it?

Yet you, who give such advice, do not follow it yourself.

You do the very opposite.

You write Diatribes. You exalt papal decrees. You magnify the authority of men. You employ every means possible to draw us away from the plain testimony of Scripture and into the tangled inventions of human reasoning. Meanwhile, you neglect those things which are truly necessary. By doing so, you corrupt the simplicity of Scripture and mingle divine truth with human traditions.

This reveals that your advice was not given sincerely.

You do not write seriously about these matters, but seem to imagine that, through eloquent words and clever arguments, you can turn the whole world wherever you please. Yet in reality you turn it nowhere, for what you offer consists only of contradictions.

Indeed, one might rightly call you another Proteus, forever changing shape, or Vertumnus, forever shifting form. Or one might apply to you the words of Christ:

"Physician, heal thyself."

The teacher whose own ignorance exposes his faults has need first to correct himself.

Until, therefore, you prove your affirmative case, we shall stand firmly by our denial.

Before God, before the saints, and before the whole world, we boldly affirm that no one is obliged to accept as truth that which cannot even be defined or certainly proved.

It is astonishing presumption to demand that we receive a doctrine

merely because many respected men have repeated it for a long time, when those same men cannot even explain what it actually is.

Would it be fitting for Christian teachers to mock poor souls in matters concerning salvation by presenting them with a doctrine that has no clear meaning?

Where now is the celebrated wisdom of the Greeks, which at least once concealed its errors beneath an appearance of truth?

Where is that polished Latin eloquence?

It has come at last to this: deceiving others, and being deceived itself, by a single empty word—Free Will.

The fault, however, lies not so much with the fathers as with their readers.

Men take every weakness or inconsistency found in the writings of holy men and elevate it to the highest authority, while overlooking their stronger and more faithful statements.

Suppose someone, relying upon the holiness of Peter, were to insist that everything Peter ever said must be true. He would then have to defend Peter's attempt to dissuade Christ from suffering, or Peter's request that Christ depart from him. Yet these were precisely the things for which Peter received correction from the Lord.

Such readers resemble those who, for the sake of mockery, claim that the Gospels themselves contain falsehoods because they record the words of Christ's enemies. They point to the Jews who said that Christ had a devil, or to those who accused Him of deserving death, or to those who charged Him with perverting the nation.

The defenders of Free Will make the same mistake, though not intentionally. They seize upon those statements in the fathers which arose from human weakness and place them above the fathers' clearer statements which were written under a better understanding of grace. Thus the weaker testimony is exalted and the stronger testimony is neglected.

Why not rather choose what is best?

There are many excellent statements among the fathers which plainly support the truth.

Take Jerome as an example. What could be more careless or more misleading than his saying:

"Virginity peoples heaven, and marriage the earth."

As though heaven were not intended for the patriarchs, the apostles,

and faithful Christian husbands. As though heaven belonged only to celibate virgins. Yet statements like these are eagerly collected by the sophists and used as authorities, simply because they value numbers more than judgment

Section XXXII

The True Church And The Visible Church

You argue that it is difficult to believe God would permit His Church to remain in error for so many centuries, or that He would fail to reveal the truth concerning such an important doctrine to His saints.

At first hearing, this argument appears persuasive.

Yet it proves far less than you imagine.

In the first place, we do not deny that God preserves His Church. On the contrary, we firmly confess that Christ remains with His people to the end of the age, that the Holy Spirit guides His elect, and that God's true Church cannot finally perish.

These things are certain.

The real question is another matter altogether.

Who are the Church?

And how are they to be identified?

You assume that all those who possess public authority, ecclesiastical office, reputation, or influence must necessarily be the Church of God.

Scripture repeatedly proves otherwise.

Consider the history of Israel.

How often did kings, priests, prophets, and the nation as a whole fall into error?

Under Elijah, idolatry became so widespread that the prophet believed he alone remained faithful.

Yet God had reserved for Himself seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

These faithful believers were largely hidden from public view.

The visible majority was corrupt.

The faithful remnant was small.

Nevertheless, the remnant—not the majority—constituted the true people of God.

The same pattern appears throughout Scripture.

Cain possessed outward prominence.

Abel possessed God's favour.

Ishmael appeared to be Abraham's heir.

Yet the promise belonged to Isaac.

Esau held the natural advantages.

Yet Jacob received the blessing.

Again and again, God works through a remnant rather than through the multitude.

The visible church and the true church are not always identical.

Consider also the age of the Arians.

There was a time when much of the visible church embraced false doctrine.

Many bishops and church leaders supported error.

Yet God preserved His truth through a comparatively small number of faithful witnesses.

The majority possessed the buildings, the titles, and the public recognition.

The minority possessed the truth.

History therefore teaches the very opposite of what you claim.

The fact that a doctrine has been widely accepted does not prove it is true.

Nor does the fact that a doctrine has been held for centuries establish its authority.

Truth is not determined by numbers.

God has often preserved His Church beneath the surface of visible religion.

Even during the darkest periods, Christ has never abandoned His people.

But those people have not always occupied positions of prominence.

Nor have they always been recognised by the world.

Indeed, many whom the world called heretics were among God's faithful servants, while many celebrated leaders proved to be enemies of the truth.

What happened in the days of Christ Himself?

The religious establishment rejected Him.

The priests opposed Him.

The rulers condemned Him.

The crowds cried out for His crucifixion.

Yet the true people of God were found among a small and despised

company of disciples.

The visible church condemned the Lord of glory.

The true church followed Him.

Therefore, your argument proves too much.

If public authority and historical continuity are the marks of truth, then the Jewish leaders who condemned Christ must have been right.

But they were not.

The lesson is clear.

God preserves His Church.

But He often does so in ways that confound human expectations.

The true Church is not identified merely by numbers, office, reputation, or antiquity.

It is identified by faithfulness to the Word of God.

And wherever God's truth is believed and confessed, there the Church exists, even if it appears weak, hidden, and despised in the eyes of the world.

Section XXXIII

The Saints Of God And The Judgment Of Charity

You may ask:

If the Church is often hidden, and if God's true people are not always easily recognised, whom are we to trust? How are we to regard those saints and teachers whose names are honoured throughout the history of the Church?

My answer is simple.

I do not deny that many of those men were true saints of God.

Indeed, I gladly acknowledge them as brethren in Christ.

I honour their memory and thank God for their testimony.

But the question before us is not whether they were saints.

The question is whether everything they taught was therefore correct.

Those are two very different matters.

A man may be a true believer and yet be mistaken in certain doctrines.

A saint may err.

A teacher may be inconsistent.

Even the most faithful servants of God remain imperfect while they live in this world.

For that reason, no doctrine should be accepted merely because it

was taught by a respected Christian.

It must be tested by the Word of God.

When I call these men saints, I do so according to the law of charity.

Charity thinks well of others.

It believes the best where there is no evidence to the contrary.

It gladly recognises fellow believers and receives them as brethren.

In this sense, we regard all faithful Christians as saints.

But faith operates differently.

Faith does not rest upon human opinion.

Faith requires certainty.

And certainty can only come from God's own testimony.

Therefore, faith does not declare a man to be a saint merely because other men think highly of him.

Faith rests upon what God has revealed.

The distinction is important.

Charity may honour a man.

Faith must test his doctrine.

Charity may presume well concerning him.

Faith must examine what he teaches.

This is why it is dangerous to build doctrines upon the reputation of great men.

The fathers sometimes spoke according to the Spirit.

At other times they spoke according to the weakness of the flesh.

Sometimes they expressed glorious truths concerning grace.

At other times they employed language that appears to support human ability.

A wise Christian therefore reads them with discernment.

He receives what agrees with Scripture.

He rejects what does not.

He does not swallow everything indiscriminately simply because it came from a respected source.

Indeed, it is remarkable how often men seize upon the weakest statements of the fathers while neglecting their strongest.

Whenever a father speaks powerfully of grace, divine sovereignty, and man's helplessness, his words are often overlooked.

But if the same father speaks carelessly concerning Free Will, that statement is immediately seized upon and elevated to the highest authority.

Such treatment is neither fair nor honest.

The better statements should interpret the weaker.

The clear should explain the doubtful.

The spiritual should govern the fleshly.

For the saints were honoured by God, not because of their mistakes, but because of the truth they believed and proclaimed.

Their authority therefore rests, not in their personal reputation, but in their agreement with Scripture.

This principle applies to every teacher who has ever lived.

No man is above correction.

No saint is beyond examination.

No church father is equal to Holy Scripture.

The fathers are valuable servants.

But they remain servants.

Scripture alone is Lord.

Therefore, we honour the saints, learn from the saints, and thank God for the saints.

But we do not place our faith in them.

Our faith rests upon the Word of God alone.

For only God's Word is incapable of error.

And only God's Word possesses absolute authority over the conscience.

Section XXXIV

The Judgment Of The Spirit And The Authority Of Scripture

At this point you ask a reasonable question.

If the Church is often hidden, if saints are not always easily recognised, and if neither numbers, learning, rank, nor reputation can settle these matters, how are we to discover the truth?

Who shall decide between competing claims?

Who shall certify what is true and what is false?

Must everything therefore remain uncertain?

Must we surrender ourselves to scepticism and confess that certainty is impossible?

By no means.

The answer is neither difficult nor uncertain.

We do not discover the truth by counting heads.

We do not determine it by consulting the most learned scholars.

We do not establish it by the decrees of councils, the authority of bishops, or the traditions of men.

Neither do we discover it through those enthusiasts who boast continually of special revelations and private inspirations.

For I have opposed such men no less vigorously than I have opposed the Pope himself.

Nothing is more dangerous than a spirit that claims authority above the Scriptures.

By such claims countless errors have entered the Church.

Men have elevated their own imaginations above the Word of God and have persuaded others to follow them into confusion and darkness.

The Holy Spirit never contradicts the Scriptures which He Himself inspired.

Therefore, all claims must be tested.

All spirits must be examined.

All doctrines must be weighed.

There are, in fact, two kinds of judgment.

The first is an internal judgment.

This belongs to the individual believer.

By the illumination of the Holy Spirit, a Christian comes to recognise and embrace the truth of God.

The Spirit persuades the heart.

He enlightens the understanding.

He grants certainty concerning the things of God.

As Paul writes:

"He that is spiritual judgeth all things." (1 Corinthians 2:15)

This inward conviction is necessary for personal faith.

Without the work of the Spirit, no one can truly understand or receive the things of God.

Yet this internal judgment is personal.

It cannot serve as a public standard by which the Church settles controversies.

For one man's inward conviction cannot bind another man's conscience.

Therefore, a second judgment is required.

This is the external judgment.

By this judgment doctrines are examined publicly before the Church.

This judgment does not rest upon private impressions, personal experiences, or claims of spiritual insight.

It rests upon the Holy Scriptures.

Scripture is the public standard.

Scripture is the final court of appeal.

Scripture is the rule by which every spirit, every teacher, every doctrine, and every church must be tested.

This external judgment belongs particularly to the ministry of the Word.

It is the duty of pastors and teachers to expound the Scriptures faithfully, defend the truth, strengthen believers, and refute error.

Yet even they possess no authority apart from the Word itself.

Their task is not to create truth but to declare it.

For this reason, whenever disputes arise, we do not ask:

What says the Pope?

What says the council?

What says tradition?

What says this or that respected teacher?

Rather, we ask:

What saith the Scripture?

For God's Word alone possesses authority that cannot fail.

God cannot lie.

God cannot err.

And therefore His Word remains the sure and certain foundation of faith.

The Church may err.

Councils may err.

Teachers may err.

The greatest saints may err.

But the Scriptures cannot err.

Therefore, every spirit must be tested by Scripture.

Every doctrine must be examined by Scripture.

Every claim to authority must submit to Scripture.

For in the end, it is not the Church that judges the Word of God.

It is the Word of God that judges the Church.

And wherever the Scriptures speak clearly, all controversy must come to an end.

The Clarity Of Holy Scripture

We now come to the heart of the matter.

For many years Christians have been troubled by a dangerous and destructive claim—that the Scriptures are obscure, uncertain, and difficult to understand.

This notion has been repeated so often that many accept it without question.

Yet few errors have done greater harm to the Church.

If the Scriptures are truly obscure, how can they serve as our guide?

If they are uncertain, how can they judge controversies?

If they are ambiguous, how can they provide assurance to the conscience?

Indeed, if the Scriptures are not clear, what remains but confusion?

It is therefore necessary to expose this error and establish the truth.

Let us begin with the testimony of Scripture itself.

Moses instructed Israel that difficult matters were to be brought before the priests and judges, who were to decide them according to the Law of God.

But how could they judge according to the Law if the Law itself were obscure?

How could it settle disputes if its meaning were uncertain?

A law that cannot be understood is no law at all.

The very purpose of a law is to provide clarity.

It exists to guide conduct, settle disagreements, and establish justice.

If it were vague and uncertain, it could accomplish none of these purposes.

What is true of earthly laws is even more true of the Word of God.

Shall God provide greater clarity concerning temporal affairs than concerning eternal salvation?

Shall He leave men without certainty in the very matters upon which their souls depend?

Such a thought is absurd.

God is neither careless nor cruel.

He has not spoken in order to confuse His people.

He has spoken in order to instruct them.

The Scriptures repeatedly testify to their own clarity.

David declares:

"The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes." (Psalm 19:8)

That which enlightens the eyes cannot be darkness.

That which gives sight cannot itself be obscure.

Again he writes:

"The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple." (Psalm 119:130)

Notice carefully whom the Scripture enlightens.

Not merely the learned.

Not merely theologians.

Not merely scholars.

It gives understanding even to the simple.

God has not reserved His truth for an intellectual elite.

His Word is a lamp for ordinary believers.

Isaiah likewise directs men:

"To the law and to the testimony." (Isaiah 8:20)

He does not send them into uncertainty.

He sends them to a clear and authoritative standard.

Malachi teaches that the people should seek instruction from the priest because he is a messenger of the Lord.

But what kind of messenger would he be if neither he nor his hearers could understand the message?

The whole idea is absurd.

Throughout Scripture the Word of God is described as light.

It is called a lamp.

It is called a path.

It is called truth.

These descriptions are incompatible with obscurity.

A lamp exists to illuminate.

A path exists to guide.

Truth exists to reveal.

Therefore, when men claim that the Scriptures are fundamentally obscure, they contradict the very testimony of Scripture itself.

The real problem does not lie in the Word of God.

It lies in the hearts of those who refuse to receive it.

Some passages may contain difficulties.

Certain expressions may require careful study.

Yet the great truths necessary for salvation are plainly revealed.

God has not hidden the Gospel beneath impenetrable darkness.

He has proclaimed it openly.

The Scriptures are not a maze designed to bewilder believers.

They are a light designed to lead them to Christ.

For this reason we reject the claim that God's Word is fundamentally obscure.

The Lord who gave the Scriptures intended them to be understood.

And what He has revealed for our salvation, He has revealed with sufficient clarity for all who approach His Word with humility and faith.

Section XXXVI

Let us now turn to the New Testament.

The testimony becomes even clearer.

Paul writes that the Gospel was promised beforehand through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures. He also declares that the righteousness of God is revealed and witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.

But how could the Scriptures bear witness to these truths if they were obscure?

How could they reveal righteousness if they themselves were hidden?

A witness must speak plainly.

A testimony must be understandable.

Otherwise, it ceases to be a testimony at all.

Throughout his writings, Paul consistently presents the Gospel as a revelation of light.

Nowhere is this more evident than in his letters to the Corinthians, where he contrasts the darkness of unbelief with the brightness of divine truth.

The Gospel is not a hidden mystery reserved for a privileged few.

It is a light shining openly into the darkness.

Peter speaks in exactly the same manner.

He writes:

"We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place." (2 Peter 1:19)

Observe carefully what Peter says.

The Word of God is a light.

The darkness lies elsewhere.

The darkness is found in the world, in sin, and in the blindness of the human heart.

The Scriptures themselves are not darkness.

They are the light that dispels darkness.

Christ likewise declares:

"I am the light of the world." (John 8:12)

John the Baptist is called:

"A burning and a shining light." (John 5:35)

Not because of personal holiness alone, but because he proclaimed the Word of God.

The same is true of every faithful preacher.

The light does not originate in the messenger.

It originates in the message.

Paul describes believers as lights in the world because they hold forth the Word of Life.

The Word itself is the source of illumination.

Apart from it there is only uncertainty and confusion.

Consider also the practice of Christ and the Apostles.

Whenever they defended their teaching, to what did they appeal?

To the Scriptures.

When Christ disputed with the Jews, He directed them to search the Scriptures.

When the Bereans heard Paul preach, they searched the Scriptures daily to determine whether his teaching was true.

The Apostles did not appeal to an infallible church.

They did not appeal to secret traditions.

They did not appeal to private revelations.

They appealed to Scripture.

Why?

Because Scripture was recognised as the clearest and most trustworthy authority.

If the Scriptures were truly obscure, such appeals would have been pointless.

How could Christ direct men to an uncertain authority?

How could the Apostles prove truth from a source incapable of being understood?

The very practice of Christ and His Apostles disproves the claim that Scripture is fundamentally obscure.

Indeed, many of the central doctrines of the Christian faith are expressed in the simplest and plainest language imaginable.

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." (Genesis 1:1)

"The Word was made flesh." (John 1:14)

"Christ died for our sins." (1 Corinthians 15:3)

These truths are not hidden beneath layers of mystery.

They are proclaimed openly.

The entire Christian world confesses them because they are plainly revealed in Scripture.

And if Scripture is clear enough to reveal God as Creator, Christ as Saviour, and salvation through faith, then it is clear enough to guide believers in all matters necessary for salvation.

If the Scriptures were truly obscure, what purpose would they serve?

Why would God give a written revelation that no one could understand?

Why would Paul say:

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." (2 Timothy 3:16)

How could Scripture perform these functions if its meaning were hidden?

How could it teach, correct, reprove, and instruct if it remained inaccessible?

No.

The fault does not lie in Scripture.

The fault lies in man.

The problem is not that God's Word is dark.

The problem is that fallen men often love darkness rather than light.

When unbelievers fail to understand the Scriptures, the cause is not obscurity in the Word but blindness in the heart.

The sun remains bright even when a blind man cannot see it.

Likewise, the Word of God remains clear even when sinful men refuse to receive it.

Therefore, we reject entirely the claim that the Scriptures are

fundamentally obscure.

The Holy Scriptures are the clearest, most certain, and most trustworthy revelation God has given to His Church.

They are a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

And wherever God's Word speaks, it speaks with a clarity sufficient to guide His people into the truth necessary for salvation.

Section XXXVII

The Clarity Of Scripture Defended

You may reply that none of these arguments address your real objection. You are not claiming that all Scripture is obscure—for who would be so foolish as to say that? Rather, you maintain that certain doctrines, such as that of Free Will, remain obscure and uncertain.

I answer that my argument is directed not only against you, but against all who hold the same view. I maintain that no part of Holy Scripture ought to be called obscure.

Peter declares that the Word of God is:

"A light that shineth in a dark place." (2 Peter 1:19)

If any part of that light does not shine, the fault lies not in the lamp, but in the darkness surrounding it. Christ has not enlightened His people in such a way that part of His Word remains hidden while He commands us to attend to it. If it is not clear enough to be understood, then His command to heed it would be meaningless.

Therefore, if the doctrine of Free Will is truly obscure and uncertain, it does not belong among the doctrines of Christianity and ought to be left alone altogether. It should be numbered among those:

"Old wives' fables." (1 Timothy 4:7)

which Paul condemns.

But if the doctrine does belong to the Christian faith and to Holy Scripture, then it must be clear, open, and evident, just as the other great articles of faith are.

Every doctrine belonging to Christianity ought not only to be plain to believers, but capable of being defended from Scripture against all opposition. The testimony of God's Word ought to be sufficient to stop the mouths of adversaries, so that they have nothing with which to answer.

Christ Himself has promised:

"I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist." (Luke 21:15)

If, therefore, our defence of this doctrine is so weak that adversaries can successfully overthrow it, then Christ's promise would be false. Either the doctrine of Free Will does not belong to the Christian faith, in which case we need not contend for it at all, or it does belong to the Christian faith, in which case it must be supported by such clear testimony of Scripture that no opponent can successfully resist it.

At this point it is worth considering what Christ means when He says that adversaries shall not be able to resist.

He does not mean that they will be compelled to believe, confess their error, or remain silent. For who can force a man against his will to admit that he is wrong? Augustine rightly observed:

"What is more talkative than vanity?"

Men may continue speaking long after they have been refuted.

Rather, Christ means that they will have no valid answer. Their mouths may continue to speak, but they will have nothing of substance to say against the truth.

This can be illustrated from Scripture itself.

When Christ silenced the Sadducees by proving the resurrection from Moses, saying:

"I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

and then declaring:

"God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." (Matthew 22:32)

they were unable to answer Him. They had no argument against His reasoning. Yet did they therefore abandon their error? Certainly not.

Likewise, how often did Christ refute the Pharisees by the clearest Scriptures and the strongest arguments? The people saw that they had been defeated, and the Pharisees themselves knew it. Yet they continued stubbornly in their opposition.

The same was true of Stephen. Luke tells us that:

"They were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake." (Acts 6:10)

Yet what was their response? Did they yield to the truth? No. Ashamed at being overcome and unable to answer him, they became enraged. They shut their ears, hardened their hearts, and brought false witnesses against him.

The same principle appears in Stephen's defence before the council.

He reminded the people of God's dealings with Israel from the beginning and demonstrated that God had never commanded a temple to be built for His dwelling place. The accusation against him concerned the temple, and this was the matter under dispute.

Stephen acknowledged that a temple had indeed been built during Solomon's reign. Yet he immediately reminded them that:

"The most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands."

To support this, he quoted the prophet Isaiah:

"What house will ye build me? saith the Lord." (Isaiah 66:1)

What answer could they give to such clear testimony from Scripture? None at all. Yet they remained unmoved and continued stubbornly in their error.

Therefore Stephen declared:

"Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost." (Acts 7:51)

Notice that he says they resisted, even though they were unable to answer the truth that had been set before them.

Let us now consider an example from more recent history.

John Huss preached against the claims of the Pope from Christ's words:

"The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18)

His argument was straightforward.

If the gates of hell do not prevail against Christ's Church, yet the Papal system is openly marked by corruption, wickedness, and impiety, then the Papacy cannot be the Church of which Christ spoke.

What answer could be given to such reasoning? How could they resist the wisdom that Christ had granted him?

Yet they did resist.

They continued to oppose him until they finally condemned him to death and burned him at the stake. Far from yielding in heart, they hardened themselves against the truth.

This is precisely the kind of resistance Christ had in mind when He said:

"Your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist." (Luke 21:15)

He calls them adversaries because they will continue to oppose the truth. Otherwise, they would cease to be adversaries and become friends.

Yet while they continue to resist, they are unable to overthrow the

truth itself.

Thus Christ's meaning is plain: though they resist, they shall not be able successfully to resist.

If, therefore, I am able to refute the doctrine of Free Will in such a manner that its defenders cannot answer the testimony of Scripture, then I have accomplished my purpose, even if they continue to oppose the truth against their own consciences.

Experience teaches how unwilling men are to admit that they have been overcome. As Quintilian observed, there is scarcely anyone who would not rather appear knowledgeable than be taught.

Although many profess a willingness to learn, such professions are often little more than appearances.

How frequently men say:

"I am willing to learn."

"I am ready to follow whatever is shown to be better."

"I am only a man and liable to error."

Yet beneath these words there often lies an unwillingness to submit to the truth.

Under the appearance of humility they continue to say:

"I am not yet convinced."

"I do not understand it."

"He forces the Scriptures."

"He speaks too dogmatically."

By such excuses they shelter themselves from conviction while maintaining the appearance of fairness and moderation.

As a result, others are persuaded that their resistance arises from uncertainty rather than from stubbornness of heart.

The philosophers of Greece behaved in much the same way. Aristotle records that some, rather than admit defeat, eventually denied even the first principles of reasoning itself.

Likewise, many today persuade themselves that the truth cannot be known with certainty because learned men have disagreed about it throughout the centuries. They reason that so many scholars could not all have been mistaken.

But such arguments ignore the true condition of mankind.

The world lies under the dominion of Satan. In addition to the blindness that belongs to our fallen nature, evil powers labour continually to deepen that darkness. Men become hardened in their blindness and

remain bound in a darkness that is no longer merely human, but devilish.

Therefore, the continued resistance of men to the truth proves nothing against the clarity of Scripture. The fault lies not in the light itself, but in those who refuse to walk in it.

Section XXXVIII

Why Learned Men Have Remained Blind

But you ask, if the Scriptures are truly so clear, why have so many men of great learning and ability remained blind to these truths throughout the centuries?

I answer that their blindness serves to expose the true nature of that much-celebrated power called Free Will. For if man truly possesses that exalted ability by which he is said to apply himself to those things that pertain to eternal salvation, why has he remained so ignorant of truths set plainly before him?

This is that same power which neither sees what lies before its eyes, nor hears what sounds in its ears, much less understands or seeks after the things of God.

To this applies the testimony so often quoted by Christ and the Evangelists from Isaiah:

"Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive." (Isaiah 6:9)

What does this mean except that the human heart is so bound under the power of Satan that, unless it is wonderfully enlightened by the Spirit of God, it cannot of itself perceive the things most clearly set before it?

Such is the misery and blindness of fallen mankind.

The Evangelists themselves were astonished that the Jews remained unmoved by the words and works of Christ. His miracles were undeniable. His teaching was irresistible. Yet the people remained blind. Their explanation was found in this very passage of Scripture, which teaches that man, left to himself, sees without perceiving and hears without understanding.

Indeed, what could be more astonishing than the words of John:

"The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." (John 1:5)

Who would have believed such a thing had Scripture not declared it? That light should shine in darkness and yet the darkness remain

unchanged! That truth should be openly proclaimed and yet rejected! That men should hear the very words of God and still remain blind!

Therefore, it is no wonder that men renowned for learning have remained blind in divine things throughout so many generations.

Had such blindness prevailed in ordinary human matters, it might have appeared remarkable. But in spiritual things it would be far more surprising if even one man, left to himself, were not blind.

For what is the whole human race without the Spirit of God?

It is, as I have already said, the kingdom of Satan and a vast chaos of darkness.

For this reason Paul calls the evil powers:

"The rulers of the darkness of this world." (Ephesians 6:12)

And again he declares:

"Which none of the princes of this world knew." (1 Corinthians 2:8)

If the rulers and great men of this world did not know the wisdom of God, what are we to think of the rest?

By these princes Paul means those who are highest in human wisdom and reputation—the very men whom the world admires for their learning and understanding.

Why were the Arians blind? Were there not among them men of remarkable ability?

Why was Christ regarded as foolishness among the Gentiles? Were there not learned philosophers among the nations?

Paul declares:

"The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain." (1 Corinthians 3:20)

Notice that he speaks not merely of men in general, but of the wise—the very persons whom the world esteems most highly. If such men are unable by their wisdom to know the things of God, what hope remains for human ability?

I may speak more fully of these matters later. For the present, let this suffice.

The Scriptures are perfectly clear. By them the doctrines of the Christian faith can be defended in such a way that adversaries are unable successfully to resist them. Any doctrine that cannot be established by the clear testimony of Scripture is of no concern to us, for it does not belong to Christianity.

If there are those who do not see this clarity, who stumble beneath

the brightness of this divine light, their blindness proves nothing against the Scriptures themselves.

If they are wicked men, they merely demonstrate the dreadful extent of Satan's power over fallen humanity. Though the words of God are plain and unmistakable, they remain unable either to hear or to understand them. They are like men deceived by a magician, persuaded that the sun is cold or that a stone is gold.

If, however, they are among God's elect, their temporary blindness serves another purpose. God permits them, for a time, to be led into error so that His power may afterwards be displayed more clearly in their deliverance. For apart from His grace we can neither see nor do anything that is spiritually good.

Nor does this inability arise, as some suppose, from weakness of intellect.

Indeed, nothing is better suited to receive the Word of God than a humble sense of weakness. Christ came for such people, and it is to such people that He sends His Gospel.

The true obstacle lies elsewhere.

It is Satan who reigns within fallen human nature and continually resists the Word of God. Were it not for this opposition, one single proclamation of God's Word would be sufficient to convert the entire world. There would be no need for repeated preaching, warnings, exhortations, and instruction.

But because Satan blinds the minds of men and hardens their hearts against the truth, the clearest testimony of Scripture is despised until God Himself, by His Spirit, opens the eyes of the blind and grants them understanding.

Section XXXIX

The Testimony Of Erasmus Against Himself

But why should I continue enlarging upon this matter?

Why should I not conclude this opening discussion and pronounce judgment against you from your own words, according to the saying of Christ:

"By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." (Matthew 12:37)

You yourself confess that the Scriptures are not entirely clear on this

subject. Having suspended any firm declaration of your own belief, you proceed throughout your whole book to discuss what may be said on either side of the question. Indeed, this is the very reason you chose to call your work a Diatribe rather than a Denial or some other title. Your purpose was to collect arguments rather than to assert conclusions.

But if the Scriptures are not clear on this matter, why do those authorities of whom you speak so highly not only remain convinced of one side of the argument, but confidently define and defend the doctrine of Free Will as though it rested upon the clearest testimony of Scripture?

I refer to that great multitude of learned men whom the agreement of many centuries has approved. Many of them possessed an extensive knowledge of the Sacred Writings. Many were commended not only for their learning but also for their godly lives. Some even sealed their testimony with their own blood.

If your words are sincere, then you must believe that these men possessed extraordinary understanding of Scripture and that they defended the doctrine of Free Will upon biblical grounds.

But if that is true, then they must have believed that the Scriptures spoke clearly on this matter. Otherwise, where was their great understanding of the Sacred Writings?

Moreover, what greater rashness could there be than to suffer persecution and death for a doctrine that is uncertain and obscure?

Men do not become martyrs for doubtful opinions.

If they shed their blood for a matter that could not be known with certainty, they were not martyrs of Christ, but martyrs of error.

Consider the matter carefully.

To whom should greater weight be given?

To the judgment of so many learned men, orthodox teachers, saints, martyrs, theologians, ancient and modern, together with so many schools, councils, bishops, and popes, who believed the Scriptures to be clear and who, according to your own testimony, defended that conviction by their writings, their lives, and even their deaths?

Or to your own private judgment, which declares that the Scriptures are not clear, although you have never, so far as I know, shed a single tear or endured a single hardship for the defence of Christian doctrine?

If you believe those men were correct, why do you not follow them?

If you believe they were mistaken, why do you appeal to them so confidently and at such length?

Why do you summon such an army of authorities as though their number alone were enough to overwhelm us?

Your argument resembles a mighty flood of eloquence, but the waters rush back upon your own position rather than upon mine.

My case remains secure while yours is carried away by the very witnesses you have called to support it.

For consider what your argument actually implies.

You describe these men as possessing exceptional knowledge of Scripture. You praise their learning, their holiness, their writings, their labours, and their sufferings.

Yet at the same time you insist that the Scriptures concerning this matter are obscure and uncertain.

In doing so, you accuse them of the very thing you seek to honour them for.

For if Scripture is obscure, then these men could not have understood it with certainty.

If Scripture is ambiguous, then they defended what they themselves could not clearly know.

Thus, while professing to praise them, you actually attribute to them ignorance, folly, and reckless confidence.

I, who am accused of opposing them, do not treat them so poorly as you do.

For I do not commend them as masters of Scripture while simultaneously declaring that Scripture is incapable of giving certainty on the very matter they defended.

In this respect, your praise becomes a greater insult than any criticism I could offer.

Thus the testimony of your own authorities turns against you and supports the very position you seek to oppose.

Section XL

Luther's Conclusion To The Introduction

Here, then, I have you firmly caught, as the saying goes, in a final and unavoidable argument.

One or other of your assertions must be false.

Either those men whom you praise as possessing great understanding of the Sacred Scriptures, remarkable holiness of life, and the honour of

martyrdom, were indeed what you claim them to be; or your assertion that the Scriptures are not clear on this matter must be false.

Both statements cannot stand together.

Yet throughout your book you repeatedly insist that the Scriptures are not sufficiently clear concerning Free Will. Since this is the position toward which your whole argument tends, it follows that your praise of those learned men cannot be taken seriously.

You have commended them, not because you truly believed their judgment to be correct, but either from a natural inclination to favour them or from a desire to flatter them. Their names are employed chiefly to impress the unlearned, to prejudice men's minds against Luther, and to burden my cause with contempt rather than with arguments.

For my part, I maintain that neither of your assertions is true.

First, I maintain that the Scriptures are perfectly clear.

Secondly, I maintain that, in so far as those men defended the doctrine of Free Will, they were greatly mistaken in their understanding of Scripture.

Nor do I believe that they bore witness to that doctrine by their lives or by their deaths. They testified to it only with their pens. Their hearts often travelled a different road from their writings.

Therefore I conclude this part of the discussion with the following observation.

If Scripture is obscure, as you claim, then nothing certain concerning Free Will has ever been established from Scripture. This follows from your own argument.

Furthermore, throughout the history of the world, nothing has ever been demonstrated in the lives of men that proves the existence of such a power as Free Will. We have already shown this.

To teach a doctrine that is neither clearly taught in Scripture nor confirmed by experience is not the work of Christian theology. It belongs rather to the realm of fable and speculation.

Such teaching resembles the tales of Lucian, except that Lucian merely entertained his readers with amusing stories and harmed no one. These defenders of Free Will, however, trifle with matters of eternal importance and, by their foolish speculations, place countless souls in danger.

Indeed, I could well bring the whole introduction to a close at this point.

The testimony of my opponents has become evidence against themselves. No proof is more compelling than the confession of an

adversary who unintentionally supports the very position he seeks to oppose.

Nevertheless, as Paul instructs us to silence vain talkers, we must proceed further.

Let us therefore enter upon the discussion itself and examine the arguments in the order presented by the Diatribe.

First, we shall answer the arguments advanced in support of Free Will.

Secondly, we shall defend those arguments of ours which the Diatribe attempts to refute.

Lastly, we shall contend for the grace of God against the doctrine of Free Will.

DISCUSSION

First Part

Section XLI

The Definition Of Free Will Examined

Let us begin, then, with your definition of Free Will.

You define it as:

"A power of the human will by which a man may apply himself to those things which lead unto eternal salvation, or turn away from them."

At first sight, this definition appears simple enough. Yet upon closer examination, it contains serious difficulties.

Indeed, I suspect that you have purposely stated the definition in the briefest and most general terms, avoiding any detailed explanation of its parts. Had you explained it more fully, the weaknesses within it would have become immediately apparent.

The first difficulty concerns the very name itself.

I have already shown that the term "Free Will," properly speaking, belongs to God alone.

Only God possesses absolute freedom.

Only God acts entirely according to His own will without restraint, dependence, or limitation.

To apply such a title to man is already to speak too highly of human ability.

For what does the ordinary person understand by the words "Free Will"?

Surely he understands a will that is able to choose and act independently.

He understands a power capable of directing itself wherever it pleases.

But man possesses no such freedom.

He lives continually under the government of God.

He depends upon God for life, breath, and all things.

He cannot continue in existence for a single moment apart from God's sustaining power.

How then can such a creature properly be called free?

Indeed, even the angels themselves are not free in this absolute sense.

They exist and act only under God's sovereign rule.

How much less, then, can fallen man claim such freedom?

The very term therefore creates confusion.

It promises more than the reality can deliver.

A more suitable expression would be something like "changeable will" or "mutable will."

For man's will is indeed capable of change.

It turns one way and then another.

It is influenced, directed, and governed.

But it is not free in the sense that God is free.

Augustine recognised this problem long ago.

He preferred language that reflected man's dependence rather than language that exaggerated his powers.

And in this Augustine showed greater wisdom than many who followed him.

For in matters of theology, precision is essential.

We are not dealing with rhetorical flourishes or impressive sounding phrases.

We are dealing with truth.

And when words are used carelessly, they mislead the mind.

A false term often gives rise to a false doctrine.

Therefore, before we examine the substance of your definition, we must first recognise that the very name "Free Will" is itself questionable.

For it attributes to man a degree of liberty that belongs properly to God alone.

And when language is inflated beyond reality, confusion inevitably follows.

The safest course is always to speak plainly and accurately.

Theology requires clarity.

The conscience requires certainty.

And neither is helped by grand expressions that promise more than they can prove.

For this reason, even before we reach the substance of your argument, we are already compelled to question the language upon which it rests.

The name itself suggests a freedom that fallen man simply does not possess.

Section XLII

In order that we may not appear to be fighting merely over words, I am willing, for the sake of argument, to grant certain points.

Let us allow the term "Free Will" to remain, even though it is an improper and potentially misleading expression. Let us also accept Erasmus' description of it as "a power of the human will," although such language is not entirely accurate, since angels also possess a will. Nevertheless, because our discussion concerns man alone, I will not press the point.

Having made these concessions, we now come to the heart of the matter.

The real question lies within the definition itself.

Some parts of it appear clear enough.

Other parts are so vague and uncertain that they seem deliberately designed to avoid precise examination.

Yet nothing requires greater clarity than a definition.

A definition exists to explain a thing plainly.

If it is obscure, it explains nothing.

The clearer parts of Erasmus' definition are these:

"A power of the human will."

And:

"By which a man can."

And:

"Unto eternal salvation."

These expressions are sufficiently understandable.

But other parts remain hidden in uncertainty.

What does it mean for the will to "apply itself"?

What does it mean to "turn away"?

And what precisely are "those things which lead unto eternal salvation"?

These are the crucial elements of the definition, yet they are the least clearly explained.

Indeed, they seem to retreat into darkness just when clarity is most needed.

One almost feels as though he is disputing with a philosopher who delights in obscurity rather than truth.

Before the argument can even begin, one must first discover what the argument means.

This places us under a double burden.

First, we must search for the meaning hidden behind the words.

Then, having discovered it, we must proceed to examine whether it is true.

Such obscurity serves neither understanding nor instruction.

For the sake of discussion, however, let us attempt to determine what Erasmus intends.

By the phrase "power of the human will," I understand him to mean the faculty by which a man wills or does not will, chooses or refuses, approves or disapproves.

In other words, the natural capacity of the will itself.

But what is meant by saying that this power "applies itself" or "turns away"?

Surely this can mean nothing other than the actual exercise of willing or refusing, choosing or rejecting.

The will either moves toward something or away from it.

Beyond this, it is difficult to imagine what further meaning these words might contain.

If another meaning is intended, then it has not been explained.

And the fault cannot be laid upon the reader when the author has failed to define his terms.

As the lawyers rightly observe:

"The words of one who speaks obscurely, when he could have spoken plainly, are to be interpreted against himself."

In matters of theology, obscurity is especially dangerous.

We are not engaged in philosophical speculation.

We are dealing with truths that concern the conscience and eternal salvation.

Therefore, we must speak plainly.

Now let us consider the final phrase:

"Those things which lead unto eternal salvation."

I assume Erasmus refers here to the means by which God brings sinners to salvation.

And what are those means?

They are the Word of God and the work of God.

Nothing else leads a sinner to grace and eternal life.

The Law reveals God's righteous demands and exposes our sin.

The Gospel reveals Christ and calls us to faith.

Through these means God grants grace, renews the heart, and brings His people into everlasting life.

Therefore, if Free Will is said to apply itself to those things which lead to salvation, we must ask a simple question:

How does it do so?

What power does it possess?

What action does it perform?

For unless these questions are answered clearly, the definition remains incomplete.

And until the definition is clear, the doctrine built upon it cannot stand securely.

Before we can debate whether Free Will possesses such power, we must first determine precisely what that power is supposed to be.

Otherwise, we are merely arguing over words while the substance remains hidden.

Section XLIII

The Inability Of Man To Seek Eternal Life

Let us now consider the goal toward which Erasmus says Free Will can direct itself.

He tells us that the human will can apply itself to those things that lead unto eternal salvation.

But what is eternal salvation?

It is not some earthly blessing that can be seen, measured, or understood by human reason.

It belongs to the eternal kingdom of God.

It concerns realities that lie beyond the reach of fallen human

understanding.

As Paul declares:

> "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

If these things have never entered the heart of man, how can man naturally desire them?

If they are beyond his understanding, how can he direct himself toward them?

Indeed, Paul immediately answers the question:

> "But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit." (1 Corinthians 2:10)

The things of God are known only because God reveals them.

They are not discovered by human wisdom.

They are not sought by natural reason.

They are not attained by the efforts of Free Will.

Without the Holy Spirit, no man truly knows, believes, or desires the things of eternal life.

Experience confirms this.

Consider the greatest minds the world has ever produced.

What did the philosophers think of the resurrection of the dead?

What did they think of eternal life?

The more celebrated they were for wisdom, the more readily they mocked such truths.

When Paul preached at Athens, many regarded him as a babbler and a proclaimer of strange doctrines.

When he testified before Festus concerning the resurrection, he was accused of madness.

The learned world laughed at what God had revealed.

And the same remains true today.

Many who are praised for their intelligence and learning openly ridicule the truths of Scripture.

They dismiss eternal life as a fantasy.

They speak confidently of things they do not understand.

Yet all of this only proves the point.

The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God.

They are foolishness unto him.

Therefore, if eternal salvation belongs to a realm beyond human understanding, and if the natural man neither knows nor desires it, how can Free Will apply itself toward it?

Before a man can seek something, he must know that it exists.

Before he can desire it, he must perceive its value.

But Scripture teaches that fallen man possesses neither.

Until the Spirit opens his eyes, eternal life remains hidden from him.

And what remains hidden cannot be sought.

Therefore, the claim that Free Will can direct itself toward eternal salvation is not merely unsupported by Scripture.

It is contrary to Scripture.

The very thing Erasmus attributes to Free Will is the very thing Paul attributes to the work of the Holy Spirit.

And if the Spirit alone reveals these things, then Free Will can neither discover them nor pursue them by its own power.

Thus the foundation of Erasmus' definition begins to crumble.

For the will cannot apply itself to what it neither understands nor desires.

And apart from grace, eternal salvation belongs to that category.

Section XLIV

The Consequences Of Erasmus' Definition

Let us consider where Erasmus' definition ultimately leads.

According to his own words, Free Will possesses the power to embrace or reject the Word and work of God, by which man is brought to eternal salvation.

But if this is true, then the consequences are far greater than Erasmus appears to realise.

If the will can embrace the Word of God, then it can also reject it.

If it can choose one course, it can choose the opposite.

If it can love, it can hate.

If it can approve, it can disapprove.

And if it can do these things in matters relating to salvation, then it already possesses a remarkable power.

Indeed, if the will can move itself toward God, however slightly, then it has already begun the work of salvation.

It may not complete the journey, but it has certainly taken the first

step.

Yet once that first step is granted, what remains for grace to accomplish?

For if man can begin the work, then salvation is no longer entirely of God.

Part of the glory belongs to man.

Part belongs to grace.

And thus the foundation of the Gospel is undermined.

Consider what Erasmus is actually saying.

The Word of God calls men to repentance.

The Gospel calls men to faith.

The cross calls men to self-denial.

If Free Will can embrace these things by its own power, then it possesses an ability that Scripture attributes to God alone.

For to love God's Law, to believe His promises, to embrace the Gospel, and to submit to the cross are not natural acts of fallen man.

They are fruits of divine grace.

The Scriptures everywhere teach that these things are produced by the Holy Spirit.

Yet Erasmus assigns them to the human will.

In doing so, he attributes to Free Will what belongs to God alone.

This is why I have said that the term "Free Will" is, properly speaking, a divine title.

Only God possesses absolute freedom.

And now Erasmus has gone further still.

He has assigned to human will powers that approach the divine.

The ancient Pelagians at least attempted to distinguish between man's ability to understand and his ability to choose.

The Sophists made similar distinctions.

But Erasmus has set these aside and elevated the power of choice itself.

The result is a doctrine that grants astonishing abilities to fallen man.

Nor does he stop there.

He even exceeds many of the philosophers.

For philosophers have long debated whether anything can truly move itself.

Yet Erasmus teaches that the fallen human will not only moves itself, but directs itself toward eternal realities that lie beyond its own

understanding.

This is a remarkable claim indeed.

Even more remarkable is the fact that Erasmus contradicts himself.

Earlier he admitted that the human will is powerless without grace.

Yet now he defines Free Will as possessing the ability to apply itself to eternal salvation.

In one place he denies the power.

In another place he affirms it.

In one sentence he attributes everything to grace.

In the next he assigns significant power to the human will.

Thus his definition stands in conflict with his own earlier statements.

And in attempting to defend Free Will, he has granted it powers greater than many of its strongest historical defenders ever claimed.

For if the human will can truly move itself toward salvation, then it possesses a power that Scripture reserves for God alone.

Section XLV

The Contradictions Of Free Will

Do you see, Erasmus, where your definition has led you?

Whether intentionally or not, you have exposed the weakness of your own position.

Your words reveal either a misunderstanding of the subject itself or a lack of careful consideration concerning what you are actually asserting.

For while you say very little about Free Will, you attribute far more to it than almost any of its defenders.

You do not fully explain its nature, yet you assign to it extraordinary powers.

In this respect, even the Sophists are more restrained than you.

Peter Lombard, who may be considered one of their principal teachers, defined Free Will as the faculty of discernment and choice. He maintained that man could choose good only when aided by grace, but would inevitably choose evil if grace were absent.

Whatever faults may be found in that position, it at least agrees more closely with Augustine.

Augustine consistently taught that fallen man, left to himself, can do nothing but sin.

Indeed, he often described the will not as free but as being in bondage.

You, however, go further than either Augustine or the Scholastics.

You grant to Free Will the power, of itself and apart from grace, to move toward good and turn away from evil.

This is the unavoidable implication of your definition.

For when you say that the will can "apply itself," you place the initiative within man himself.

You make the movement toward God arise from human ability rather than from divine grace.

And in doing so, you reduce the work of the Holy Spirit to something secondary and unnecessary.

The consequences of such teaching are serious.

For if the will can begin the movement toward God, then grace merely assists a work already started by man.

But Scripture teaches the opposite.

It is God who begins the work.

It is God who awakens the sinner.

It is God who grants repentance and faith.

It is God who draws men to Christ.

Nothing in salvation originates from fallen man.

Therefore, even those theologians whose views I reject are, in this matter, closer to the truth than Erasmus.

At least they acknowledge that without grace the will can accomplish nothing spiritually good.

You, however, attribute to it a power that undermines the necessity of grace altogether.

Suppose I were speaking privately with one of these Scholastic theologians and asked him a simple question.

If something can move only in one direction by its own power, but can move in the opposite direction only when acted upon by another, would you call it free?

Surely he would laugh at such a definition.

A stone naturally falls downward.

It may be lifted upward, but only through an external force.

No one therefore calls the stone free.

Likewise, if the human will naturally moves only toward sin and can move toward God only through the operation of divine grace, then it cannot properly be called free.

At best, it may become free when acted upon by another.

But that is not the question before us.

We are not discussing what grace can make the will become.

We are discussing what the will is in itself.

And when that question is honestly faced, there remains little more than an empty name.

The reality corresponding to the term "Free Will" disappears.

For a will that cannot move itself toward God is not free in the sense claimed by its defenders.

It is dependent.

It requires divine intervention.

It requires grace.

The Sophists also err in another respect.

They place too much confidence in man's natural ability to distinguish good from evil.

They fail to appreciate the depth of human corruption and the necessity of regeneration.

They speak of external assistance while neglecting the inward renewal of the Holy Spirit.

But we shall address those matters later.

For now, it is enough to observe that Erasmus' definition cannot stand.

It grants too much to fallen man, contradicts its own assumptions, and ultimately leaves us with nothing but a grand title attached to an empty reality.

Having examined the definition itself, we are now ready to consider the arguments brought forward in support of this supposed Free Will.

Section XLVI

The Appeal To Ecclesiasticus

We now come to the arguments that are commonly advanced in support of Free Will.

The first is taken from Ecclesiasticus 15:14–18:

"God from the beginning made man, and left him in the hand of his own counsel. He gave him also His commandments and His precepts, saying, If thou wilt keep My commandments, they shall preserve thee. He hath set before thee fire and water; stretch forth thy hand unto whether thou wilt. Before man is life and death, good and evil; and whether him

liketh shall be given him."

At the outset, I could simply decline to build any doctrine upon this passage.

Questions have long existed concerning the authority and place of this book within the canon of Scripture.

Nevertheless, I am willing to accept the passage for the sake of argument, so that we may not become distracted by disputes over the canon and lose sight of the issue before us.

But before examining the text itself, I will answer Erasmus with his own method.

Throughout this debate, whenever a passage has opposed your position, you have been quick to declare it obscure, uncertain, or difficult to interpret.

Very well then.

If this passage is obscure or ambiguous, it cannot establish any doctrine with certainty.

By your own principles, it proves nothing.

Yet I am willing to proceed further.

The real difficulty for Erasmus is not proving that man is commanded to choose.

The difficulty is proving what Free Will actually is and what power it possesses.

Throughout his work, he has supplied many opinions, distinctions, and observations, but he has yet to produce a clear text demonstrating the power he claims belongs to the human will.

Instead, he gathers together a variety of theories, philosophical speculations, and theological opinions.

He speaks favourably of positions that elevate human ability.

He blurs the distinction between nature and grace.

He speaks as though the wisdom of philosophers and the teaching of the Gospel differ only in degree rather than in kind.

Such reasoning cannot fail to raise concern.

For Scripture presents a far greater contrast between fallen man and divine grace than Erasmus appears willing to admit.

The Gospel is not merely an improvement upon natural reason.

It is a revelation from heaven.

Faith is not merely the highest achievement of human understanding.

It is the gift of God.

And eternal life is not discovered by philosophical enquiry.

It is revealed through Christ.

For this reason, we must be careful not to mix human wisdom with divine truth.

Whenever philosophy is permitted to sit in judgment upon Scripture, the result is confusion.

The doctrines of grace become weakened.

The necessity of the Holy Spirit becomes diminished.

And man begins to receive credit for what belongs to God alone.

Therefore, before we allow this passage from Ecclesiasticus to serve as evidence for Free Will, we must ask a more fundamental question:

Does it actually describe the ability of fallen man?

Or does it merely set before man the commands and judgments of God?

These are not the same thing.

For Scripture frequently commands what man ought to do without implying that he possesses the ability to do it.

The Law reveals duty.

It does not necessarily reveal ability.

Indeed, one of the chief purposes of the Law is to expose our inability and drive us to seek mercy from God.

Therefore, even if this passage speaks of choosing between good and evil, it does not automatically follow that fallen man possesses the spiritual power to choose what pleases God.

That remains to be proved.

And until it is proved, the doctrine of Free Will gains no support from this text.

The question before us is not whether God commands.

The question is whether fallen man possesses the power to obey apart from grace.

And that is the issue we must now examine.

Section XLVII

Contradictions In Erasmus' Opinions

Erasmus further complicates matters by dividing the doctrine of Free Will into three separate opinions.

According to him, the first opinion teaches that man cannot will

what is good without special grace; that he cannot begin, continue, or complete any truly good work apart from the help of God. Yet Erasmus admits that this view appears highly probable, even if he considers it somewhat severe.

The second opinion teaches that Free Will is capable of nothing except sin, and that grace alone produces all good within us.

The third opinion goes further still, declaring that Free Will is merely an empty term, because God works all things in all men, both good and evil.

Erasmus states that it is chiefly against this last opinion that he writes.

But here he reveals a serious misunderstanding.

These are not three entirely different doctrines belonging to three separate camps.

Rather, they are different ways in which the same general truth has been expressed by various writers.

The differences are often differences of language and emphasis rather than entirely separate systems of belief.

More importantly, Erasmus has failed to notice that his own definition of Free Will conflicts with the first opinion which he himself considers highly probable.

Consider the matter carefully.

Earlier, Erasmus defined Free Will as a power by which a man can apply himself to those things that lead to eternal salvation.

Yet now he commends an opinion which says that man cannot will what is good without grace.

How can these two statements stand together?

If man cannot will good without grace, then he cannot apply himself to salvation by his own power.

And if he can apply himself to salvation by his own power, then he must possess some ability to will what is good apart from grace.

The one assertion destroys the other.

Thus the definition affirms precisely what the approved opinion denies.

In attempting to oppose others, Erasmus has ended by contradicting himself.

The difficulty becomes even greater when we remember what is involved in applying oneself to salvation.

To move toward God, to seek His grace, to embrace His promises,

and to desire eternal life are all spiritual goods.

If the will can perform these actions apart from grace, then it already possesses spiritual ability.

But if, as Erasmus admits, man cannot will good without grace, then such actions cannot arise from the natural will.

The contradiction is unavoidable.

What Erasmus grants in one place, he takes away in another.

What he establishes by definition, he overturns by argument.

And thus he leaves us with two different Free Wills.

One Free Will, found in his definition, possesses power to move toward salvation.

The other, found in his approved opinion, lacks all such power until grace intervenes.

The result is confusion.

For a doctrine cannot stand when its own definition is contradicted by the very opinions offered in its defence.

This confusion arises because Erasmus has not fully considered the implications of his own words.

Had he done so, he would have seen that the first opinion he calls probable is far closer to our position than to his own definition.

Indeed, once it is admitted that man cannot will good without grace, the foundation of his definition begins to collapse.

For what remains of Free Will if it cannot move toward God until God first acts upon it?

The answer is simple.

Very little remains except the name itself.

And throughout this controversy, that is precisely the point at issue.

We are not debating a word.

We are debating a reality.

If the thing itself does not exist, then no amount of argument can preserve the title.

And if Free Will cannot perform what its defenders claim for it, then the name survives while the substance disappears.

Section XLVIII

Let us now set aside the Free Will described in Erasmus' definition and examine the position that he himself has admitted to be highly probable.

Erasmus grants that man, without special grace, cannot will what is good.

This admission is crucial.

For our present discussion concerns not what grace can accomplish, but what man can do apart from grace.

And here Erasmus openly acknowledges that the natural will cannot will spiritual good.

But if this is true, then it follows that Free Will cannot apply itself to those things that lead unto eternal salvation.

For to seek God, to desire salvation, to embrace the Gospel, and to pursue eternal life are all spiritual goods.

If the will cannot will good, then it cannot perform any of these actions.

Thus Erasmus has surrendered the very point he set out to defend.

He has granted that the will lacks the ability which his own definition attributes to it.

Indeed, he goes even further.

He states that after the Fall the human will became so corrupted that it lost its liberty, became subject to sin, and is unable to restore itself to a better condition.

These are remarkable admissions.

For what is a will that has lost its liberty?

What is a will that is compelled to serve sin?

Surely it cannot properly be called free.

A slave is not free.

And a will enslaved to sin cannot simultaneously possess the power to choose spiritual good.

Yet this is precisely what Erasmus attempts to maintain.

On the one hand, he describes the will as bound and enslaved.

On the other hand, he continues to speak of it as though it possessed freedom.

The contradiction is obvious.

A will that is unable to free itself cannot be called free in any meaningful sense.

But let us go further.

Erasmus still wishes to leave some kind of desire and effort within the human will.

He says that man retains a certain inclination or striving, even though

he cannot will good without grace.

But what kind of desire can this be?

It cannot be a good desire.

For he has already admitted that the will cannot will good.

Therefore, whatever remains must be an evil desire.

A will enslaved to sin can only produce what accords with its nature.

It cannot generate holy affections while remaining unrenewed.

This raises another difficulty.

Erasmus says that this desire and effort remain, yet he denies that they arise from the power of the will itself.

What does this mean?

If they belong to the will, how are they not attributed to the will?

And if they are not attributed to the will, how can they be said to remain within it?

The statement becomes hopelessly confused.

The will is said both to possess and not possess the same thing.

It is said to retain a power which, at the same time, it cannot exercise.

Such language explains nothing.

It merely disguises the problem beneath ambiguous words.

The truth is much simpler.

If the will has lost its liberty and is enslaved to sin, then every desire that proceeds from it will bear the character of that bondage.

The sinner may choose among various earthly matters.

He may pursue one sin rather than another.

He may alter his behaviour in outward ways.

But he cannot direct himself toward God.

He cannot desire spiritual good.

He cannot embrace Christ.

He cannot prepare himself for grace.

For all such things belong to the work of God alone.

Therefore, the more carefully Erasmus' position is examined, the more it confirms our argument.

He begins by defending Free Will.

He ends by describing a will that is bound, enslaved, unable to will good, and incapable of restoring itself.

Such a will is not free.

It is in bondage.

And that, precisely, is what we have maintained from the beginning.

The reality of man's condition agrees with our doctrine, even when Erasmus attempts to deny it.

For once the liberty of the will is lost, nothing remains but the empty name of Free Will.

The thing itself has disappeared.

And when the reality is gone, the title serves only to confuse those who hear it.

Section XLIX

The Fiction Of A Neutral Will

Perhaps Erasmus imagines that there is some middle position between these two statements:

"Man can will what is good."

And:

"Man cannot will what is good."

Perhaps he supposes that the will possesses a kind of neutral power which is neither good nor evil in itself. According to this theory, the will does not truly move toward God without grace, yet neither does it immediately move toward evil. It simply exists in a state of indifference, capable of being directed upward by grace or downward by sin.

Such an idea may appear attractive, but it cannot withstand examination.

For what becomes of Erasmus' own admission that the will, having lost its liberty, is compelled to serve sin?

What becomes of the desire and endeavour which he says remain?

What becomes of that supposed power by which the will can apply itself to the things that pertain to eternal salvation?

If the will possesses such a power, then it cannot be merely neutral.

A power that can move toward salvation is already something substantial.

It is already more than a simple capacity.

It is already a movement toward good.

Nor can desire and endeavour be reduced to some abstract state of indifference.

Desire always seeks something.

Endeavour always strives toward an object.

Neither can exist in a vacuum.

Neither can remain inactive.

Therefore, if a desire exists, it must be directed either toward good or toward evil.

There is no third alternative.

Indeed, whichever way Erasmus turns, he finds himself trapped in contradictions.

In attempting to defend Free Will, he continually describes it as though it were in bondage.

In seeking to liberate it, he binds it more securely.

The very arguments intended to establish its freedom become arguments proving its slavery.

The notion of a neutral will is itself a philosophical invention rather than a biblical doctrine.

It arises from playing with words rather than observing reality.

Men often imagine that because a term can be constructed logically, the thing itself must therefore exist.

But Scripture teaches otherwise.

Christ declares:

"He that is not with me is against me." (Matthew 12:30)

Notice carefully what our Lord does not say.

He does not say:

"He that is not with me is in a neutral position."

Nor does He describe a middle state between obedience and rebellion.

There are only two kingdoms.

There are only two masters.

There are only two directions.

If God reigns within a man, that man is moved toward good.

If God does not reign within him, he remains under the dominion of sin.

There is no independent territory lying between the two.

There is no untouched region of the soul where the will sits in perfect neutrality waiting to choose its master.

If God is present, the will is directed toward righteousness.

If God is absent, the will is directed toward evil.

As Erasmus himself has already admitted, when liberty is lost, man becomes a servant of sin.

And a servant of sin does not remain neutral.

He wills evil.

He speaks evil.

He practices evil.

Thus the truth has forced the argument into a corner.

The very reasoning employed by Erasmus ends by supporting the position he opposes.

In attempting to defend Free Will, he confirms its bondage.

In seeking to refute our doctrine, he strengthens it.

The result is much like Free Will itself.

The more it strives to accomplish good apart from grace, the more clearly it reveals its inability.

Thus the entire argument turns against itself.

The first opinion therefore leaves us with a contradiction.

It denies that man can will spiritual good, yet insists that some desire remains.

But if that desire is not good, what is it?

And if it is good, how can it exist in a will that cannot will good?

The position cannot be maintained.

For once it is admitted that the will is enslaved to sin, the fiction of a neutral will disappears.

And with it disappears one of the last refuges of the doctrine of Free Will.

Section L

The Three Opinions Are One

The second opinion, according to Erasmus, teaches that Free Will is capable of nothing except sin and that grace alone produces every good thing within us.

This, in substance, is the position commonly associated with Augustine, who repeatedly affirmed that fallen man possesses no spiritual ability apart from divine grace.

The third opinion, which Erasmus calls the most severe of all, teaches that Free Will is merely an empty term and that everything men do is performed under the bondage and necessity of sin.

It is against these latter two opinions that Erasmus chiefly directs his attack.

Yet here I confess that I find it difficult to understand why he regards them as fundamentally different from the first.

Indeed, I can see no real difference between them.

For what does the first opinion teach?

It teaches that after the Fall, man lost his liberty, became bound to sin, and cannot will what is spiritually good apart from grace.

If this is granted, what remains of Free Will?

What reality corresponds to the name?

A liberty that has been lost is no liberty at all.

And to continue calling it liberty after it has ceased to exist is simply to preserve a name after the thing itself has disappeared.

If a man loses his sight, we do not continue calling him one who sees.

If health is lost, we do not describe the sick man as healthy.

In the same way, if liberty has been lost, why continue speaking as though it remained?

The language itself becomes misleading.

Indeed, it contradicts ordinary reason and common speech.

For what could be more absurd than to say that a man possesses Free Will while simultaneously affirming that he is compelled to serve sin and cannot will what is good?

The two statements destroy one another.

If he is compelled, he is not free.

If he cannot will good, his liberty has vanished.

Thus the first opinion leads inevitably to the same conclusion as the other two.

If the will is bound to sin, then it can do nothing but sin.

And if it can do nothing but sin, then the supposed liberty attributed to it exists only as a word.

The substance is gone.

The reality has disappeared.

Only the title remains.

Therefore, Erasmus condemns the latter opinions while approving the former, without recognising that all three ultimately teach the same thing.

He opposes with one hand what he embraces with the other.

He attacks the conclusion while affirming the premises that inevitably produce it.

And thus, once again, he finds himself supporting the very position he intended to refute.

For when it is admitted that fallen man cannot will spiritual good and remains in bondage to sin, the doctrine of Free Will has already

surrendered its strongest claims.

What remains is not liberty, but bondage.

Not power, but inability.

Not freedom, but dependence upon grace.

And this, from the beginning, has been our contention.

Section LI

The Testimony Of Ecclesiasticus Examined

Let us now return to the passage from Ecclesiasticus and compare it with the first opinion that Erasmus himself considers highly probable.

The opinion states that Free Will cannot will what is spiritually good apart from grace.

Yet the passage from Ecclesiasticus is brought forward to prove that Free Will possesses both reality and power.

Immediately we encounter a difficulty.

The opinion to be proved asserts one thing, while the passage used as proof appears to assert another.

The argument therefore lacks consistency from the beginning.

Before considering the details, let us examine the passage carefully and in its proper order.

The text begins:

"God made man from the beginning."

At this point, nothing is said concerning Free Will.

The passage simply describes the creation of man.

It tells us what God did when He first made mankind, but it offers no explanation concerning man's spiritual ability after the Fall.

The next statement says:

"He left him in the hand of his own counsel."

Many immediately assume that this phrase establishes the doctrine of Free Will.

But why should such a conclusion be drawn?

The text does not yet speak of commandments, obedience, grace, or salvation.

Rather, it speaks of man's position within creation.

It may simply mean that God entrusted man with dominion over the world and gave him responsibility within the created order.

This understanding agrees well with the opening chapters of Genesis,

where Adam is given authority over the earth and the creatures placed under his care.

In that sense, man is left to exercise dominion according to his own counsel.

But after this, the text introduces something new:

"He added His commandments and His precepts."

Notice carefully what has happened.

God first creates man and entrusts him with authority over the created order.

Then He places commandments before him.

The introduction of divine command changes the situation entirely.

Man is no longer acting merely according to his own counsel.

He now stands under the revealed will of God.

And it is only at this point that the words appear:

"If thou wilt keep the commandments."

Here the real question begins.

For now we are no longer discussing man's authority over earthly things.

We are discussing his relationship to God and his response to God's commands.

In this respect, Scripture presents man as living within two distinct realms.

In one realm, man exercises authority over the things placed under him.

He may use them according to his judgment and discretion.

In this sphere he acts freely within the limits God has established.

But in the other realm—the realm of obedience to God—man is not left to his own counsel.

Here he stands under God's authority.

Here he is governed by God's commands.

Here he is called to submit his will to the will of his Creator.

This distinction is crucial.

For the passage does not present man as an independent ruler in spiritual matters.

Rather, it places him under the command of God.

Indeed, far from proving Free Will, the passage emphasises man's obligation to obey a higher authority.

Therefore, even if one accepts this interpretation, the text does not

establish what Erasmus requires it to establish.

It does not prove that fallen man possesses the ability to obey.

It merely states what God commands.

And there is a vast difference between command and ability.

The command reveals what ought to be done.

It does not automatically reveal what man is capable of doing.

Thus the argument for Free Will has not yet been proved.

At most, the passage tells us that God commands obedience and sets before man the path of life.

But it says nothing concerning man's ability to walk that path apart from divine grace.

Indeed, when understood in harmony with the rest of Scripture, the passage supports the very truth Erasmus seeks to deny.

For man stands under God's command, not under the rule of his own autonomous will.

And wherever God's command is supreme, the doctrine of an independent Free Will begins to disappear.

Section LII

But here the Diatribe will sharply retort: "Ecclesiasticus, by saying, 'If thou wilt keep the commandments,' signifies that there is a will in man both to keep and not to keep them. Otherwise, what is the use of saying to one who has no will, 'if thou wilt'? Would it not be ridiculous to say to a blind man, 'If thou wilt see, thou mayest find a treasure'? Or to a deaf man, 'If thou wilt hear, I will tell thee an excellent story'? Such language would merely mock their misery."

I answer: these are the arguments of human reason, which is always ready to produce such little shoots of worldly wisdom. Therefore, I must now dispute, not with Ecclesiasticus, but with human reason itself, concerning the conclusion it draws. For reason is accustomed to interpret and twist the Scriptures of God according to its own conclusions and syllogisms.

Yet I enter the discussion willingly and confidently, knowing that reason can produce nothing but folly and absurdity in such matters, especially when it attempts to display its wisdom in divine things.

First, let me ask how it can be proved that the freedom of the will is implied whenever expressions such as "if thou wilt," "if thou shalt do,"

or "if thou shalt hear" are used. Reason replies that the common use of language among men seems to require such a meaning.

But what could be more perverse? Divine things are judged according to human customs. Heavenly matters are measured by earthly standards. In doing so, reason exposes its own foolishness and shows that its thoughts concerning God are nothing more than human thoughts.

But suppose I prove that even among men such expressions do not always imply ability. How often do parents speak this way to their children, telling them to do something, not because they are able, but so that they may discover their inability and seek the help of their parents?

How often does a wise physician instruct an obstinate patient to do or avoid certain things, in order that the patient may learn through experience the seriousness of his condition?

Indeed, nothing is more common than to use language of challenge or provocation in order to reveal what a person can or cannot do.

I mention these examples only to expose the weakness of reason's conclusions and to show how blindly it applies them to Scripture. Even in ordinary life such conclusions do not always hold true. Yet reason sees one example and immediately assumes it applies universally to every matter concerning God and man.

If, therefore, God deals with us as a father deals with his children, revealing our weakness; or as a physician reveals a disease; or even as one who righteously mocks the pride of His enemies; and if for this purpose He says through His law, "Do," "Hear," "Keep," or "If thou wilt"—can we rightly conclude from this that man possesses free power to obey? Or that God is mocking us?

Is it not far more reasonable to conclude that God uses His law to reveal our helplessness if we are His friends, and to expose and shame our pride if we are His enemies? For this, as Paul teaches, is the very purpose of the law. (Romans 3:20; 5:20; Galatians 3:19, 24.)

Human nature is blind. It does not know its own powers, or rather, its own diseases. Worse still, it is proud and imagines that it knows and can do everything. To cure this pride and ignorance, God employs no instrument more effective than His law.

We shall speak more fully of this later. For the present, it is enough to have exposed the foolish conclusion of carnal wisdom:

"If thou wilt" — therefore thou art able to will freely.

The Diatribe imagines man to be whole and sound, because outward

appearances suggest as much. Therefore, from the words "if thou wilt," "if thou wilt do," and "if thou wilt hear," it hastily concludes that man must possess free will, otherwise God would be mocking him.

But Scripture presents man very differently. It describes him as corrupt, captive, ignorant of his corruption, and proud in his ignorance. Therefore, by such words God awakens and stirs him, so that by experience he may learn how utterly unable he is to do any of the things commanded of him.

Section LIII

But I will now press the Diatribe itself.

If you truly believe, O Madam Reason, that the conclusion "If thou wilt, therefore thou hast free power" is valid, why do you not follow your own argument consistently? For according to your own "probable opinion," free will cannot will anything good.

How then can you conclude from the words "If thou wilt keep" that man possesses the freedom either to will or not to will? Can the same fountain send forth both bitter water and sweet?

Indeed, are you not yourself mocking mankind? For you say that man can keep what he is unable either to will or to choose. Therefore, you cannot really believe that the conclusion "If thou wilt, therefore thou hast free power" is sound, though you defend it with such eagerness. Or, if you do believe it, then you cannot sincerely maintain that it is merely a "probable opinion" that man cannot will what is good.

Thus reason becomes entangled in its own arguments and conclusions. It no longer knows what it says or what it is speaking about. The only thing it demonstrates clearly is that free will is defended by arguments that destroy one another. They are like the Midianites, who, when fighting against Gideon and the people of God, turned their swords against one another and perished by mutual slaughter. (Judges 7.)

Let me press the matter further.

Ecclesiasticus does not say, "If thou hast a desire or endeavour to keep the commandments." It simply says:

"If thou wilt keep the commandments."

Now if we follow your method of reasoning, we ought to conclude:

Therefore, man is able to keep the commandments.

If the argument is valid, then we must not merely attribute to man

some small desire or weak endeavour, but the full and complete power of keeping the commandments.

For otherwise Ecclesiasticus would be mocking man's misery by commanding him to keep what he cannot keep. Indeed, it would not be enough to suppose that man possesses only some desire or attempt to obey. Unless he possessed the full ability to keep the commandments, the charge of mockery would still remain.

But let us suppose, for argument's sake, that this supposed desire and endeavour of free will is something real. What then shall we say to the Pelagians, who used this very passage to deny grace altogether and to attribute everything to free will?

If your conclusion is correct, then the Pelagians have established their case. For Ecclesiasticus speaks not of desire or endeavour, but of actual keeping. Therefore, if you deny the Pelagians their conclusion concerning keeping, they may with even greater justice deny your conclusion concerning endeavouring.

And if you take away their whole free will, they will take away your little fragment of it. For you cannot consistently preserve a small part of what you deny in its entirety.

Consequently, whatever arguments you use against the Pelagians, who derive complete freedom of the will from this passage, may be used with even greater force against your own notion of a small remaining power of free will.

Indeed, the Pelagians themselves would agree with us. If their doctrine cannot be proved from this passage, then neither can yours. For if we are to reason from conclusions, Ecclesiasticus favours the Pelagians far more strongly than it favours you.

He speaks plainly:

"If thou wilt keep the commandments."

He even says:

"If thou wilt keep the faith."

If your method of argument is accepted, then keeping the faith must also lie within man's natural power. Yet faith is one of God's most precious gifts and not something that man can produce by his own strength.

In short, there are many differing opinions concerning free will, and every one of them seizes upon this passage of Ecclesiasticus as support. Yet these opinions contradict one another.

Therefore, they inevitably make Ecclesiasticus contradict himself. The

same words are made to support opposing doctrines. As a result, nothing certain can be proved from them.

Indeed, if your conclusion were admitted, it would support the Pelagians against all others. And thus, the Diatribe would find itself wounded by its own sword.

Section LIV

But, as I said at the beginning, so I say again: this passage from Ecclesiasticus supports none of those who defend free will; rather, it stands against them all.

For the conclusion,

"If thou wilt, therefore thou art able,"

must not be admitted.

Instead, these words, and all others like them, are to be understood as showing man his impotence. Through such admonitions, proud and ignorant man comes to recognise what otherwise he would neither know nor feel.

Ecclesiasticus is speaking here not merely of the first man, Adam, but of mankind generally. Yet it matters little whether the words are understood of Adam alone or of all men. The argument remains the same.

Adam, while he possessed grace, was not powerless. Yet even in his case God showed, by the commandment, what Adam would be apart from grace. For if the first man, who possessed the Spirit, could not maintain obedience when left without further strengthening from that Spirit, what can we do who are altogether without it?

In Adam we see a fearful example, given for the humbling of our pride.

His case reveals what free will can accomplish when left to itself and not continually sustained and increased by the Spirit of God.

He who possessed the first-fruits of the Spirit could not preserve himself. He fell from that blessed condition.

What then can we, who are already fallen, accomplish toward recovering those first-fruits which have been lost?

And especially now, when Satan reigns within us with far greater power. For he overthrew Adam when he merely tempted him from without. How much more easily does he rule over those in whom he

already dwells?

Nothing, therefore, can be brought forward more powerfully against free will than this passage of Ecclesiasticus when it is considered together with the fall of Adam.

For Adam's history demonstrates plainly that man's will, even in its best condition, could not stand without the continual aid of divine grace.

If that be true of Adam before the Fall, how much more is it true of us after the Fall?

Yet this is not the place to pursue that argument further. Opportunity may arise elsewhere to treat it more fully.

For the present, it is sufficient to have shown two things:

First, that Ecclesiasticus says nothing whatever in favour of free will, though many regard it as one of their strongest authorities.

Secondly, that expressions such as:

"If thou wilt,"

"If thou wilt hear,"

"If thou wilt do,"

do not reveal what men are able to do.

They reveal only what men ought to do.

Section LV

The Testimony Of Genesis Examined

Another passage brought forward by the Diatribe is Genesis 4:7, where the Lord says to Cain:

"Unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him."

"Here," says the Diatribe, "it is shown that the motions of the mind toward evil can be overcome, and that they do not impose a necessity of sinning."

These words, "the motions of the mind toward evil can be overcome," are somewhat ambiguous. Yet from the argument and context, the meaning is clearly this: that free will has the power to overcome evil desires, and that such desires do not compel a man to sin.

But what has been left to grace if this is so? What need is there of the Spirit? What need is there of Christ? What need is there of God Himself, if free will can overcome evil desires by its own strength?

And what becomes of that "probable opinion" which claims that free will cannot even will what is good? Here the victory over evil is attributed

to a power which, according to the same argument, cannot even desire good. The inconsistency of the Diatribe is beyond measure.

The truth is simple.

As I have already shown, passages of this kind teach a man what he ought to do, not what he can do.

Thus Cain is told that he ought to rule over sin and bring its desires into subjection. But neither did he do so, nor could he do so, because he was already under the contrary dominion of Satan.

It is well known that the Hebrews frequently use the future tense in place of a command.

This occurs throughout the Ten Commandments:

"Thou shalt have no other gods before Me."

"Thou shalt not kill."

"Thou shalt not commit adultery."

If these words were taken merely as future predictions, they would become promises rather than commandments. Since God cannot lie, it would then follow that no one could ever commit idolatry, murder, or adultery.

The absurdity of such a conclusion shows that these expressions are commands, not predictions.

Accordingly, the passage concerning Cain may rightly be understood as saying:

"Let its desire be under thee, and do thou rule over it."

Likewise, concerning the woman:

"Be thou subject unto thy husband, and let him rule over thee."

That God was not making a promise to Cain is evident from what followed. Had it been a promise, it would necessarily have been fulfilled. Yet Cain's conduct plainly proved otherwise.

Therefore, the words were not spoken to assure Cain of his ability, but to declare his duty. They reveal what he ought to do, though they give him no power to perform it.

Thus this passage, like all the others already examined, teaches obligation rather than ability. It shows what God requires of man, not what man is capable of accomplishing through free will.

Section LVI

The third passage adduced by the Diatribe is from Moses:

"I have set before thee life and death, blessing and cursing:
therefore choose life."

(Deuteronomy 30:19)

"What words," says the Diatribe, "could be plainer than these? They leave to man the liberty of choosing."

I answer: What could be plainer than your blindness?

How, I ask, do these words grant liberty of choosing? Is it because Moses says, "Choose"? Does it follow that because Moses commands a thing, it is therefore accomplished? If so, there is no need of the Spirit.

Since you continually repeat the same arguments, I am justified in giving the same reply. If liberty of choice is proved by the command "choose," then why does your own "probable opinion" maintain that free will cannot will what is good? Can it choose without willing? Or can it choose against its will?

Let us now consider your illustration.

You say:

"It would be ridiculous to say to a man standing where two roads meet, 'You see two roads before you; take whichever you wish,' when only one of them is open."

Once again, this argument proceeds from human reason, which imagines that an impossible command must necessarily be ridiculous.

But I maintain that such a command may serve another purpose altogether. It may be intended to reveal to the man his own inability.

Indeed, our situation is worse than your illustration suggests.

We stand where two roads meet, yet not merely is one road closed—both are closed to us. At least, the road leading to good is closed unless God freely grants His Spirit. The other road, however, remains broad and easy if God leaves us to ourselves.

Therefore, there is nothing ridiculous in saying to such a man:

"Choose which way you will go."

For by this command he is brought to see his own helplessness, especially if he has been boasting of his strength or imagining that no obstacle stands in his way.

The words of the law, therefore, are not given to demonstrate the power of the will. They are given to illuminate the blindness of reason, so that it may discover that its supposed light is darkness and that its supposed strength is weakness.

As Paul says:

"By the law is the knowledge of sin."

(Romans 3:20)

He does not say:

"By the law comes the removal of sin,"

or,

"By the law comes power over sin."

The law gives knowledge only, and specifically the knowledge of sin. It reveals our evil condition and our helplessness. It does not impart strength. Knowledge is not power. Knowledge teaches us how powerless we are.

What is the knowledge of sin except the knowledge of our own corruption and infirmity?

Paul does not say:

"By the law comes the knowledge of strength,"

or,

"By the law comes the knowledge of goodness."

The sole purpose of the law, according to the Apostle, is to make sin known.

Here, therefore, I take occasion once again to press my general answer: the words of the law teach and admonish man concerning what he ought to do, not concerning what he can do. They bring him to the knowledge of his sin, not to confidence in his own strength.

Therefore, my dear Erasmus, whenever you present the words of the law as evidence for free will, I answer you with the words of Paul:

"By the law is the knowledge of sin,"

not the knowledge of the power of the will.

Gather together, if you please, every imperative verb in Scripture—provided they are commands and not promises—and I will immediately declare what they all mean. They show what men ought to do, never what they can do.

Even common grammarians and schoolboys know this. The imperative mood signifies what ought to be done. The indicative mood signifies what is done or what can be done.

Yet you theologians become less sensible than schoolboys. The moment you encounter an imperative such as:

"Do,"

"Keep,"

"Choose,"

you instantly transform it into an indicative, as though the command itself proved the ability to obey it.

But there are many slips between command and performance.

A thing may be commanded and yet never be done. Indeed, what is commanded may be entirely beyond the power of the one commanded.

Such is the difference between an imperative and an indicative, even in the ordinary affairs of life. Yet in matters as high as heaven is above the earth, you immediately convert commands into proofs of ability.

The moment God says:

"Do,"

"Keep,"

"Choose,"

you conclude that it must already be done, or at least that man possesses the power to do it.

Such reasoning is not theology. It is blindness.

Section LVII

In the fourth place, the Diatribe brings forward several passages from Deuteronomy 30 which speak of choosing, turning, and keeping:

"If thou shalt keep..."

"If thou shalt turn away..."

"If thou shalt choose..."

"These expressions," says the Diatribe, "are used to no purpose if there is not in man a free will unto good."

I answer: And you, my friend Diatribe, draw your conclusion no less preposterously from these expressions.

You set out to prove only a certain endeavour or inclination of free will. Yet none of the passages you have cited prove such an endeavour. Indeed, by your own reasoning, they prove something far greater. If your conclusion is valid, they ascribe everything to free will.

Let us distinguish, therefore, between the words of Scripture and the conclusions which the Diatribe fastens upon them.

The words themselves are imperatives. They say nothing except what ought to be done.

Moses does not say:

"Thou hast the power and strength to choose."

He simply says:

"Choose."

Likewise, when he says:

"Keep,"

"Do,"

he gives a command. He prescribes duty. He says nothing about human ability.

The Diatribe, however, adds its own conclusion:

"Therefore man can do these things, otherwise the commandments would have been given in vain."

To this I reply:

Madam Diatribe, your inference is false.

You prove nothing by it except your own blindness. The conclusion appears sound only because you do not examine it carefully. Yet these commandments are neither vain nor absurd. They have a most necessary purpose.

They are given so that proud and blind man may learn, through them, the disease of his own impotence whenever he attempts to perform what is commanded.

Hence your favourite illustration proves nothing.

You say:

"It is as though someone should say to a man who is bound so that he can stretch out only his left arm: 'Behold, excellent wine is on your right hand and poison on your left. Stretch out whichever hand you choose.'"

You seem greatly pleased with such comparisons. Yet you do not see that, if your argument is valid, it proves far more than you intended. Indeed, it proves what you yourself deny.

For by your reasoning, either free will can perform everything that is commanded, or else God commands in vain and ridicules mankind.

But that is nothing less than the old Pelagian doctrine, which even the Scholastic theologians have rejected, and which you yourself have condemned.

Thus, through forgetfulness and inconsistency, you reveal how little you understand the matter under discussion.

And what could be more unfortunate for a rhetorician than continually to wander from the subject, and not only argue against his opponent, but against himself?

Wherefore, I observe finally, that all the passages of Scripture adduced by the Diatribe are imperative. They neither prove nor determine anything concerning the ability of man. They merely command what ought to be done and what ought not to be done.

As for the conclusions, appendages, and illustrations which the Diatribe attaches to these passages, if they prove anything at all, they prove that free will can accomplish everything without grace. Yet this is not what the Diatribe set out to prove. Indeed, it openly denies it. Therefore, its arguments become the strongest possible refutations of its own position.

To awaken the Diatribe, if possible, from its slumber, let us suppose that I reason in this manner:

If Moses says, "Choose life and keep the commandment," then either man is able to choose life and keep the commandment, or Moses is commanding absurdities.

Have I by this argument proved my own position, namely, that free will can do nothing good and possesses no independent power? Certainly not.

On the contrary, such an argument would prove that man is fully able to choose life and keep the commandment exactly as it is commanded, otherwise Moses must be considered a ridiculous lawgiver. But who would dare say such a thing of Moses? Therefore, according to that method of reasoning, it must follow that man is able to perform all that is commanded.

This is precisely how the Diatribe argues throughout its work. Although it promised not to defend such a position, but only a small endeavour or inclination of free will, it scarcely mentions that endeavour at all. Instead, it repeatedly argues for complete human ability, and thus ends by proving the very thing it intended to avoid.

In this way, the Diatribe continually argues against itself.

As for the favourite illustration about a man whose right arm is bound and who is commanded to stretch out his right hand, I ask:

Would such a command really be absurd if the man had both arms bound and yet proudly imagined himself free? Or if, through ignorance, he believed himself capable of doing whatever he pleased?

In that case, the command would not be given to mock his captivity.

It would be given to expose his false confidence, to convince him of his helplessness, and to make him aware of his miserable condition.

The Diatribe constantly imagines a man who either can do what is commanded or at least knows that he cannot do it. But no such man exists.

If such a man did exist, then indeed impossible commands would be ridiculous, and the Spirit of Christ would be unnecessary.

Scripture, however, presents a very different picture. It describes man as bound, miserable, captive, sick, and dead. Nor is that all. Under the dominion of Satan, man is also blind. He imagines himself free when he is a slave; healthy when he is diseased; alive when he is dead; strong when he is powerless.

Satan carefully preserves this blindness. He knows that if men truly recognised their misery, they could not remain content in his kingdom. For God is always near to the broken-hearted and contrite.

Isaiah declares concerning Christ:

"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted..."

(Isaiah 61:1)

Thus, Satan's work is to keep men ignorant of their condition and persuaded of their own strength.

The work of Moses, however, is the exact opposite.

Through the Law, he reveals man's misery. He exposes sin and helplessness. He strips away self-confidence so that man, humbled and broken, may be prepared to receive grace and be led to Christ for salvation.

Therefore, the office of the Law is not ridiculous. It is among the most serious and necessary works of God.

Whoever understands this will immediately see that the Diatribe accomplishes nothing by all these arguments. It gathers together numerous imperative passages from Scripture, yet understands neither their meaning nor their purpose. Then it mixes them with fleshly conclusions and human illustrations until it proves more than it intended and continually argues against itself.

For this reason, there is scarcely any need to examine each argument individually. The whole case rests upon one mistaken principle, and once that principle is answered, the entire structure collapses.

Yet, since the Diatribe sought to overwhelm me with an abundance of arguments, I shall continue a little further and examine some additional particulars.

Section LIX

"If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land."

According to the judgment of the Diatribe, if there is no liberty of the will, it would have been more consistent for God to have said:

"If I will, ye shall eat the good of the land."

The answer is plain from what has already been said.

Indeed, what consistency would there have been in saying:

"If I will, ye shall eat the good of the land"?

Does the Diatribe imagine that men can enjoy the blessings of the land contrary to the will of God? Or that it is some strange and unheard-of thing that all such blessings come only by God's will?

The same answer applies to Isaiah 30:21:

"If ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come."

"To what purpose," asks the Diatribe, "is it to exhort those who are not in any degree within their own power? It is like saying to a man bound in chains, 'Move yourself to this place.'"

I reply:

To what purpose is it to cite passages which, in themselves, prove nothing, and then by attaching your own conclusions distort their meaning until they are made to support free will?

You set out to prove only a small endeavour of free will, yet your arguments continually attribute everything to free will.

You further appeal to passages such as:

"Assemble yourselves and come."

"Turn ye unto me, and ye shall be saved."

"Awake, awake."

"Shake thyself from the dust."

"Loose thyself from the bands of thy neck."

You also cite Jeremiah:

"If thou return, then will I bring thee again."

And Malachi:

"Turn ye unto me, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will turn unto you."

You maintain that such passages plainly indicate both the endeavour

of free will and the grace prepared for those who make that endeavour.

But all these arguments rest upon the same false foundation already exposed.

They assume that because God commands repentance, awakening, turning, or obedience, man therefore possesses the natural ability to perform them.

Yet none of these passages teaches any such thing.

They declare what God requires. They do not declare what fallen man is able to accomplish.

The command reveals duty. It does not reveal power.

Thus these passages add nothing new to the argument. They merely repeat the same mistake under different forms.

The Diatribe continues to confuse the voice of command with the p

ossession of ability, and therefore continues to draw conclusions which Scripture itself never draws.

Section LX

The Distinction Between Law And Gospel

In these passages, our friend the Diatribe makes no distinction whatever between the voice of the Law and the voice of the Gospel. Indeed, it is so blind and ignorant that it does not know what is Law and what is Gospel. For among all the passages cited from Isaiah, it has produced scarcely a single word of Law, except perhaps the phrase, "If ye will." All the rest are words of the Gospel, in which grace is offered and the afflicted are invited to receive comfort. Yet the Diatribe treats them as though they were words of Law.

Tell me, then, what can a man understand of theology or of Holy Scripture if he cannot distinguish between Law and Gospel? Or if, knowing the distinction, he nevertheless ignores it?

Such a man will inevitably confuse everything. He will mingle heaven with hell, life with death, and Christ with Moses. He can never arrive at a true knowledge of Christ. On this point I shall remind my friend the Diatribe further as we proceed.

Consider first the passages from Jeremiah and Malachi:

"If thou return, then will I bring thee again."

"Turn ye unto me, and I will turn unto you."

Does it follow from the command "Turn ye" that men therefore

possess the power to turn?

If it does, then by the same reasoning it must follow from the command:

"Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart"

that man possesses the power to love God with all his heart.

But if such arguments are valid, then what need is there of the grace of God? What need is there of Christ? What need is there of the Holy Spirit?

For these commands would prove that man can fulfil all God's requirements by his own natural powers.

Yet surely the passages should simply be received as they stand:

"If thou shalt turn, then will I also turn thee."

That is to say:

If you cease from your sins, I will cease from punishing you. If you repent and walk rightly, I will remove your captivity and your afflictions.

But even when understood in this way, the passage still does not prove that man can turn himself by his own power.

The words merely declare:

"If thou wilt turn."

They teach what ought to be done. They do not declare what man is capable of doing.

Once a man has learned from these commands what he ought to do, and has discovered that he cannot do it, he will naturally ask how such obedience may be attained. Yet before he can ask the question, the Diatribe steps in with its favourite conclusion:

"If man cannot turn himself, then the command 'Turn ye' must have been given in vain."

But we have already shown what such conclusions are worth.

Indeed, one must be under a strange stupor to suppose that the power of free will is established by words such as:

"Turn ye,"

"If thou wilt turn,"

and yet fail to see that the same reasoning would establish free will from every commandment in Scripture.

For if the command:

"Turn ye"

proves human ability, then surely the command:

"Love the LORD thy God with all thy heart"

must prove it even more.

The intention of the Lawgiver is the same in both cases. Loving God is no less required than repentance and obedience. Indeed, true conversion consists in loving God.

Yet no one attempts to establish free will from the command to love God, although everyone rushes to establish it from phrases such as:

"If thou wilt,"

"If thou wilt hear,"

"Turn ye."

If, therefore, the command to love God does not prove that free will possesses either power or ability, neither do these lesser commands prove it.

Whatever may be said against drawing a conclusion in favour of free will from:

"Love the LORD thy God with all thy heart,"

must equally be said against drawing such a conclusion from every other command or requirement found in Scripture.

For if the command to love God merely reveals the nature of the Law—showing us what we ought to do, but not what we are able to do—then the same is true of all other commands.

They reveal duty.

They do not reveal ability.

Indeed, even the Schoolmen themselves, apart from certain later writers, generally admitted that man cannot love God with all his heart.

If man cannot fulfil the greatest commandment, how shall he fulfil the lesser ones?

And since all the commandments, according to Christ, hang upon this one commandment to love God, it follows that none of them proves the power of free will.

Therefore, this conclusion remains firmly established:

The words of the Law do not prove the power of free will. They reveal what we ought to do and, at the same time, what we are unable to do apart from the grace of God.

Section LXI

But our friend the Diatribe now proceeds to even greater inconsiderateness. Not only does it infer an indicative sense from Malachi 3:7:

"Turn ye unto Me, and I will turn unto you,"

but it also zealously attempts to prove from these words both the endeavour of free will and the grace prepared for the one who endeavours.

At last, it speaks of endeavour. Yet by a strange new grammar, it makes turning mean the same thing as endeavouring. Thus the sense becomes:

"Turn ye unto Me,"

that is,

"Endeavour to turn unto Me."

And:

"I will turn unto you,"

becomes:

"I will endeavour to turn unto you."

In this way, the Diatribe attributes endeavour even to God Himself. Indeed, if turning means endeavouring in one place, why should it not mean the same everywhere? One might even conclude that grace must be prepared for God upon His own endeavouring.

Likewise, from Jeremiah 15:19:

"If thou shalt separate the precious from the vile,"

the Diatribe claims to prove not merely endeavour but liberty of choice itself, although elsewhere it has declared that such liberty is lost and has become a necessity of serving sin.

You see, therefore, what a remarkable free will the Diatribe possesses in handling Scripture. The same words are compelled to prove endeavour in one place and liberty in another, according to whatever interpretation best serves the argument at the moment.

But enough of these trifles.

The word turn is used in Scripture in two distinct senses: one legal and the other evangelical.

In its legal sense, it is the voice of the lawgiver and commander. It demands not a mere endeavour, but an actual change of life.

Jeremiah frequently uses it in this way:

"Turn ye now every one from his evil way."

And again:

"Turn ye unto the LORD."

In such passages the whole law is comprehended, for they require obedience to all God's commandments.

In its evangelical sense, however, the word is the voice of divine consolation and promise. Nothing is demanded; rather, the grace of

God is offered.

Thus we read:

"When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion."

(Psalm 126:1)

And:

"Return unto thy rest, O my soul."

(Psalm 116:7)

Malachi therefore sets forth, in a brief summary, both the preaching of the Law and the preaching of grace.

When God says:

"Turn ye unto Me,"

He speaks the language of the Law.

When He says:

"And I will turn unto you,"

He speaks the language of grace.

The first command reveals what man ought to do. The second promise reveals what God Himself will do.

Therefore, whatever proof of free will can be drawn from the command:

"Love the LORD thy God,"

or from any other commandment of the Law, exactly the same proof can be drawn from the command:

"Turn ye unto Me."

And since none of those commands proves the power of free will, neither does this one.

A wise reader of Scripture must therefore learn to distinguish carefully between the words of the Law and the words of grace. Otherwise he will fall into confusion, like the Sophists, and like this drowsy and yawning Diatribe.

Section LXII

Now observe how the Diatribe handles that one passage from Ezekiel 18:23:

"As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live."

First, it argues:

"If the expressions 'turn away,' 'hath done,' and 'hath committed' are

repeated so often in this chapter, where are those who deny that man can do anything?"

Consider the excellence of this conclusion!

The Diatribe began by promising to prove merely the endeavour and desire of free will. Yet now it proceeds to prove the whole work itself—that everything can be accomplished by free will.

Where now, I ask, is the need for grace? Where is the need for the Holy Spirit?

The argument runs thus:

"Ezekiel says, 'If the wicked man turn away from all his sins, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live.' Therefore, the wicked man both can and does do these things."

But Ezekiel is speaking of what ought to be done, whereas the Diatribe understands him as describing something already done and already accomplished.

Thus it teaches us a new grammar, in which obligation means accomplishment, command means performance, and requirement means fulfilment.

Then it proceeds to deal with that sweetest Gospel declaration:

"I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked."

The Diatribe reasons:

"Would the righteous Lord lament the death of His people if He Himself caused that death? If He does not desire our death, then our destruction must be laid entirely to our own will. For what fault can be found with Him who can do neither good nor evil in us?"

This is merely the old song of Pelagius sung once again.

For if such arguments prove anything, they prove not merely an endeavour of free will, but the complete power of free will to perform and fulfil all things. They therefore support Pelagianism far more strongly than they support the Diatribe itself.

But leaving aside these inconsistencies, let us consider the passage itself.

The words:

"I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that he should turn from his way and live,"

are pure Gospel.

They are among the sweetest consolations given to miserable sinners. They stand alongside such promises as:

"His anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life."

(Psalm 30:5)

"How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God!"

(Psalm 36:7)

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

(Matthew 11:28)

Indeed, more than half of Holy Scripture consists of promises of grace, mercy, peace, life, and salvation.

And what are all these promises saying except this very thing:

"I desire not the death of the sinner."

When God says:

"I am merciful,"

is He not saying:

"I am not eager to punish; I desire not your destruction; I delight to pardon and to save"?

Without such promises, what hope would remain for terrified consciences?

What sinner, convicted of guilt and fearing death and judgment, would not sink into despair?

These promises exist precisely to comfort those who have been wounded by the Law and who tremble under the burden of sin.

Therefore, just as free will cannot be proved from any other promise of grace, mercy, or consolation, neither can it be proved from this promise:

"I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked."

Yet the Diatribe once again confuses Law and Gospel.

It transforms this gracious promise into a legal demand, interpreting it as though God were saying:

"I do not desire that a man should become guilty of death through sin; therefore he ought to turn himself and live."

But this destroys the entire sweetness of Ezekiel's words.

God does not say:

"I have no pleasure in the sin of the sinner."

He says:

"I have no pleasure in the death of the sinner."

He is speaking of the punishment which the sinner fears and feels because of his sin.

The sinner is lying under terror, guilt, and despair. God comes to

comfort him. He does not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax. Rather, He raises the fallen sinner to hope by promising pardon and salvation.

This also teaches us an important principle.

The Law is directed to those who do not know their sin.

As Paul says:

"By the law is the knowledge of sin."

(Romans 3:20)

The promises of grace, however, are directed to those who already know their sin and are distressed by it.

Thus, whenever the Law speaks, it reveals what we ought to do.

Whenever the Gospel speaks, it addresses those who feel their misery and offers them comfort.

In Ezekiel's words:

"I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked,"

both the sinner and his misery are clearly acknowledged. God addresses the man who feels the burden of death and guilt, and He offers him mercy and life.

Section LXIII

Nothing, therefore, could be more wrongly employed in support of free will than this passage from Ezekiel. Indeed, it stands with all possible force against free will.

For it plainly shows the condition in which free will finds itself under the knowledge of sin and while attempting to turn from it. Left to itself, it can only sink deeper into evil, adding to its sins both despair and impenitence, unless God Himself intervenes by His promise, recalls the sinner, and raises him up.

The very fact that God must promise grace in order to restore and revive the sinner is itself a powerful proof that free will, by its own strength, can do nothing but fall further and further.

As the Scripture declares, it falls down to hell unless God comes to its aid.

Unless, indeed, one imagines that God is merely a talkative trifler, pouring out countless promises, not because they are necessary for our salvation, but simply because He delights in speaking.

You see, therefore, that not only the words of the Law stand against

free will, but the words of promise also overthrow it completely.

The whole of Scripture testifies against it.

The Law reveals our inability.

The Gospel reveals our need for God's intervention.

Together they leave no room for boasting in free will.

Hence, this declaration:

"I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked,"

does nothing other than proclaim and offer the mercy of God to the world.

But who receives this mercy with gratitude and joy?

Only those who are distressed and terrified by the fear of death.

Only those in whom the Law has already accomplished its work by bringing them to the knowledge of sin.

Those who have not yet experienced the work of the Law, who do not know their sin and do not feel the terror of death, despise the mercy offered in this promise.

The Gospel is precious only to those who have first been wounded by the Law.

The promise of life is sweet only to those who have first felt the sentence of death.

Thus Ezekiel's words do not magnify the power of man.

They magnify the mercy of God.

They do not teach what free will can accomplish.

They teach what God graciously offers to those who know themselves to be helpless sinners.

Section LXIV

But why is it that some are pierced by the Law while others remain untouched? Why do some receive the grace that is offered, while others despise it?

That is another question entirely.

Ezekiel is not dealing with that matter here. He is speaking of the preached and offered mercy of God, not of that secret and dreadful will of God, by which, according to His own counsel, He ordains whom He will make partakers of the mercy that is preached and offered.

This secret will is not to be searched out with curious speculation. Rather, it is to be reverenced and adored as one of the deepest secrets of

the Divine Majesty.

God has reserved these things to Himself. He has hidden them from us, and they are to be approached with far greater reverence than any earthly mystery.

Where God has not spoken, we must be content to remain silent.

The Diatribe, however, reasons thus:

"Would the righteous Lord lament the death of His people if He Himself worked that death in them? Such a thing seems absurd."

I answer as I have before:

We must distinguish between the will of God as preached, revealed, and offered to us in His Word, and God Himself as He is hidden in His own Majesty.

Whatever God has chosen to hide from us belongs not to us.

Here the old saying is true:

"What is above us is no concern of ours."

Nor is this distinction my own invention.

Paul himself makes it when writing concerning Antichrist:

"Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called
God, or that is worshipped."

(2 Thessalonians 2:4)

Paul speaks of God as He is preached, known, and worshipped among men.

Above that revealed knowledge of God a man may exalt himself.

But above God as He exists in His own eternal Majesty, nothing can be exalted, for all things remain under His sovereign power.

Therefore, God must be left in His own Nature and Majesty.

In that respect we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He wish us to concern ourselves with Him.

What concerns us is God as He has clothed Himself in His Word and revealed Himself to us through Christ.

There He presents Himself to us.

There He makes Himself known.

There we are to seek Him.

Accordingly, when we say that God does not desire the death of the sinner, we are speaking of God revealed in His Word.

He laments the death which He finds among His people and desires to remove it.

The God who is preached desires that sin and death should be taken

away and that men should be saved.

As the Psalmist declares:

"He sent His word, and healed them."

(Psalm 107:20)

But God hidden in Majesty neither laments nor removes death in this sense.

Rather, He works all things according to His sovereign will—life and death alike.

In that character He has not revealed Himself to us.

He has reserved to Himself an absolute freedom over all things.

The Diatribe errs because it fails to distinguish between God revealed and God hidden; between the Word of God and God Himself.

God does many things which He has not chosen to reveal in His Word.

He wills many things which He has not told us that He wills.

Thus, in His Word He declares:

"I desire not the death of the sinner."

Yet according to His hidden and inscrutable will, He governs all things in ways beyond our understanding.

In this matter we must be guided by the Word, not by attempts to penetrate the secret counsels of God.

Who can direct his life according to an incomprehensible will?

It is enough to know that such a will exists.

What it purposes, why it purposes it, and how far its purposes extend are matters which God has not entrusted to us.

They are to be feared and adored, not investigated.

Therefore it is rightly said:

If God does not desire our death, then our destruction must be attributed to our own will.

This is true when speaking of God revealed in the Gospel.

For He comes to all through the Word of salvation and desires that all who hear should receive Him.

The fault lies in the will that refuses Him.

As Christ said:

"How often would I have gathered thy children together...
and ye would not!"

(Matthew 23:37)

But why God does not remove this stubbornness from all men; why

He does not change every will; why He leaves some in their rebellion—these are questions belonging to His hidden Majesty.

They are not for us to answer.

Here Paul's words must silence us:

"Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?"

(Romans 9:20)

Let this suffice concerning Ezekiel's testimony.

We may now proceed to the remaining arguments.

Section LXV

The Diatribe next argues:

"If what is commanded is not within the power of every man, then all the countless exhortations, promises, threatenings, rebukes, blessings, curses, and every form of command found throughout Scripture must be cold and useless."

The Diatribe continually forgets its own position and argues against itself.

For all these passages, if they prove anything at all, prove far more than the Diatribe intends. They prove not merely an endeavour of free will, but a complete liberty and ability to fulfil everything commanded. Yet the Diatribe itself has defined free will as unable to will anything good without grace, possessing only a weak endeavour which is not derived from its own power.

I cannot see that any of these passages prove such an endeavour.

They simply require what ought to be done.

As I have said repeatedly, they reveal duty, not ability. But the Diatribe continues to return to the same argument, repeating it with a great abundance of words, though without adding anything new.

The final Old Testament passage which it brings forward is

Deuteronomy 30:11–14:

"This commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off... But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it."

The Diatribe insists that this passage teaches not only that obedience is possible, but that it is easy, or at least not difficult.

For this remarkable discovery I must thank the Diatribe.

For if Moses truly teaches here that man possesses both the ability

and the power to keep all God's commandments with ease, then all our labour has been in vain.

Why have I troubled myself with this controversy?

Why not simply produce this text and settle the matter at once before the whole world?

What need then is there of Christ?

What need is there of the Holy Spirit?

What need was there for Christ to purchase for us, at the cost of His own blood, the gift of the Spirit, whose office it is to make obedience possible, if nature had already furnished us with all that was necessary?

Indeed, the Diatribe here overturns its own teaching.

Earlier it asserted that free will can neither will nor do any good without grace.

Now it claims that free will is able not only to will good but also to keep all God's commandments with ease.

Observe how impossible it is for a man to avoid contradicting himself when his heart is not truly persuaded of the cause he is defending.

Who could refute the Diatribe more effectively than it refutes itself?

It is like a beast devouring its own flesh.

How true is the old proverb:

"A liar should have a good memory."

I have already dealt with this passage from Deuteronomy, and Paul himself has handled it most powerfully in Romans 10:5–11.

Yet let us briefly consider it again.

Moses says:

"It is not above thee."

"It is not far from thee."

"It is not in heaven."

"It is not beyond the sea."

What do these expressions mean?

Do they describe the power of the human will?

Do they speak of man's ability?

Certainly not.

They speak only of distance and location.

When Moses says:

"It is not above thee,"

he is speaking of a place, not of a power.

When he says:

"It is not far from thee,"

he is describing nearness, not ability.

The same is true of:

"in heaven,"

and

"beyond the sea."

The meaning is perfectly straightforward.

Moses is saying that the people cannot excuse themselves by claiming ignorance.

They need not ascend into heaven to discover God's will.

They need not cross the sea in search of it.

The commandments have already been given.

They have heard them.

They possess them.

The law is before their eyes.

Therefore, if they do not obey, the fault does not lie with the law or with the lawgiver, but with themselves.

Moses removes every excuse based on ignorance.

He leaves no room for the people to say:

"We did not know."

Or:

"The commandments were hidden from us."

Or:

"We were unable to obtain them."

The law has been proclaimed publicly.

It has been taught continually.

The Levites have expounded it among them.

Moses' own writings stand as a witness.

Nothing remains except obedience.

What, then, is attributed to free will in this passage?

Nothing whatsoever.

The passage demands that men obey the law which they possess, and it removes every excuse based on ignorance.

That is all.

Thus ends the Diatribe's Old Testament case for free will.

All the remaining passages which it might produce are of the same kind—commands, conditions, wishes, and exhortations.

Such passages do not teach what man can do.

They teach what man ought to do.

They expose our impotence and reveal our sin.

And if anyone insists on drawing conclusions from them about ability, then they prove not a weak endeavour of free will but complete human power to obey God without grace—which is the very thing the Diatribe itself denies.

Section LXVI

We now come to the New Testament, where once again a host of passages is assembled in defence of that miserable bondage called Free Will. Alongside these texts come all the usual allies of human reason—conclusions, comparisons, illustrations, and every kind of argument summoned from every quarter.

If you have ever seen a picture, or imagined a dream, in which a king of flies marches into battle attended by an army armed with straw spears and wooden shields against a seasoned force of veteran warriors, then you have some picture of the contest before us. Such is the spectacle presented by the Diatribe, which draws up the dreams of human reason in battle array against the very words of God.

At the head of this army stands Matthew 23:37:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, and thou wouldest not!"

The Diatribe argues that if all things happen by necessity, then the inhabitants of Jerusalem might rightly have answered the Lord:

"Why do You weary Yourself with these tears? If You did not will that we should kill the prophets, why did You send them? Why do You accuse us for doing what was necessarily done according to the will that was in You?"

Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that such reasoning is sound. What, then, has been proved?

Has the Diatribe proved its preferred position—that Free Will is unable to will what is truly good?

Quite the contrary. According to its own argument, the will is shown to be free, whole, and capable of doing everything the prophets commanded. Yet this is far more than the Diatribe ever intended to establish.

Let the Diatribe answer itself. If Free Will could not will good, why is guilt laid to its charge? If it could not hear the prophets because it lacked the power to do so, why are the people condemned for refusing to hear? Why does Christ weep over them as though they could have acted differently, if indeed they could not?

Here, then, I gladly free Christ from the charge of speaking foolishly, and turn the accusation back upon the Diatribe. This passage from Matthew either proves far more than the Diatribe wishes, or else it destroys the very argument it seeks to defend.

But here we must remember a distinction already established. We are not discussing the secret will of God's Majesty, hidden in His eternal counsel and beyond the reach of human enquiry. Men continually attempt to climb into those hidden things and pry into mysteries that God has not revealed. Yet those secret matters belong to God alone.

Rather, we are concerned with God as He has revealed Himself—in Christ incarnate, as Paul declares, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. In Him God speaks openly to men, calling, inviting, warning, commanding, and offering grace.

It is this revealed God who says:

"How often would I have gathered thy children together, and thou wouldest not!"

The God revealed in Christ genuinely desires, speaks, calls, suffers, and offers salvation through His Word, even though many refuse His grace and remain hardened under the secret judgment of God.

As John writes:

"The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not."

And again:

"He came unto his own, and his own received him not."

Thus Christ laments over the wicked and rebellious, though in His secret counsel He permits many to continue in their unbelief. Why God does so belongs to His hidden Majesty; our duty is not to question His judgments but to worship and adore Him.

The will revealed in Christ was plainly set before Jerusalem long before the destruction of the city. The prophets had proclaimed it. Christ Himself had preached it. The people resisted it knowingly and deliberately.

Therefore, this passage does not support Free Will at all. It simply

reveals the revealed will of God in the preaching of His Word and the stubborn resistance of sinful men.

Section LXVII

But Reason, ever clever and talkative, has invented an escape route for itself. Whenever it finds itself pressed by the force of Scripture and unable to answer the argument, it retreats into the hidden will of God and attempts to silence the discussion altogether.

It is much like the astronomers who, when faced with difficulties they could not explain, invented epicycles to solve every problem. In the same way, human reason runs back to the secret counsel of God whenever it finds itself unable to withstand the plain testimony of Scripture.

My answer is simple. This is not an invention of mine but a principle established by the Scriptures themselves.

Paul writes in Romans 9:

"Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?"

And immediately answers:

"Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?"

Again he says:

"Hath not the potter power over the clay?"

Likewise Isaiah declares:

"Yet they seek me daily, and desire to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness."

From these passages it is clear that there are matters concerning God's Majesty into which men are not permitted to enquire. There is a boundary beyond which human reason must not pass.

Indeed, the very nature of this subject requires reverence and silence. Men are naturally inclined to pry into the hidden things of God, yet nowhere are they more liable to error than when they attempt to investigate those mysteries which God has chosen not to reveal.

In other matters, where God has spoken plainly and where He commands us to give an answer for the hope that is within us, we are bound to speak boldly and confidently. But the secret will of God belongs to another realm altogether.

If a man refuses to heed this warning and persists in investigating the hidden counsel of God, he is like a giant striving against heaven itself. He imagines that he can overcome God by argument and discover what

God has deliberately concealed.

Yet such efforts are always futile.

The issue before us remains unchanged. Free Will must still prove its case from Scripture. It cannot escape the force of God's Word by retreating into mysteries which God has not revealed.

Whether men choose to speculate about the hidden will of God or not, the testimony of Scripture stands firm. The revealed will of God is our guide, and by that revealed will the claims of Free Will must be judged.

Therefore, let us leave the secret things to God and concern ourselves with those things which He has made known. For it is by His revealed Word—not by human speculation—that truth is established and error exposed.

Section LXVIII

Another passage frequently brought forward in support of Free Will is Christ's statement in Matthew 19:

"If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments."

The Diatribe asks, "How can Christ say, 'If thou wilt,' to one who possesses no Free Will?"

To this I reply: does Christ's use of these words prove that the human will is free? You are attempting to prove that Free Will cannot will what is truly good and that everything depends upon grace. Yet by this argument you suddenly make Free Will capable of willing all good things.

What face can such reasoning maintain?

The same answer applies to every similar expression found throughout Scripture:

"If thou wilt be perfect."

"If any man will come after me."

"He that will save his life."

"If ye love me."

"If ye shall continue."

To save the Diatribe the trouble of collecting them all, let us place every conditional expression into one list. What do they prove?

The Diatribe insists that such statements are useless unless something is attributed to the human will. I answer that they are useless only because the Diatribe makes them so.

At one moment it teaches that Free Will is incapable of willing good. At the next moment it claims that these passages prove Free Will possesses the ability to do all that God commands. Thus the same expressions are made to support contradictory conclusions at the same time.

The real purpose of these passages is quite different.

Whenever Scripture says:

"If thou wilt,"

it does not thereby declare what man is able to do. Rather, it reveals what man ought to do.

Just as the Law commands:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God,"

without proving that fallen man possesses the power to fulfil that command, so these conditional statements reveal duty, not ability.

Indeed, they often serve the opposite purpose. By setting before us God's holy requirements, they expose our weakness and drive us to seek the grace that alone can enable obedience.

The Diatribe also appeals to passages concerning reward. It argues that where reward is promised, merit must be present.

But this reasoning is equally flawed.

Christ says:

"Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven."

Does this mean that the reward is earned by Free Will?

Certainly not.

The New Testament is fundamentally different from the Old in this respect. Properly speaking, the Old Testament consists chiefly of laws, commands, warnings, and threats. The New Testament consists chiefly of promises. It proclaims Christ, offers grace, announces forgiveness, and reveals the mercy of God toward sinners.

After these promises come exhortations—not to create righteousness, but to encourage those who have already received mercy. Believers are exhorted to persevere, to practise righteousness, to abound in love, and to bear affliction patiently.

Yet the Diatribe sees none of this.

It confuses Law and Gospel, command and promise, duty and grace. It sees only moral instruction where Scripture is proclaiming the work of Christ and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit.

Thus when Christ speaks of reward, He is not praising the powers of Free Will. He is encouraging those who have already been brought into

His kingdom by grace.

The apostles themselves, to whom these promises were first spoken, were not men acting by the strength of Free Will. They were men who had been called, renewed, and sustained by divine grace.

Therefore, these passages do not support the doctrine of Free Will at all.

They reveal what God commands, what God promises, and what God works in His people through grace. They show the weakness of man and the sufficiency of Christ. They do not establish the power of the human will, but rather the necessity of God's mercy.

For wherever Scripture says, "If thou wilt," it teaches our duty. And wherever God grants the fulfilment of that duty, the glory belongs entirely to His grace.

Section LXIX

The New Testament, Free Will, And Merit

The third difficulty raised by the Diatribe is this:

How can there be room for necessity where Scripture so frequently speaks of good works and evil works, rewards and punishments? Surely, it argues, neither nature nor necessity can possess merit.

To this I reply that the Diatribe has once again become entangled in its own reasoning.

Earlier it argued that Free Will can do nothing truly good. Yet now it speaks of merit, rewards, and good works as though Free Will were capable not only of willing what is good but also of deserving eternal life.

Indeed, if its argument is followed to its conclusion, Free Will has advanced considerably. It no longer merely desires good, nor merely performs good by assistance received elsewhere. It now appears to merit eternal life itself.

Thus the words of Christ:

"Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven." (Matthew 5:12)

are interpreted as though the reward belongs to Free Will.

Such reasoning leaves little room for either Christ or the Holy Spirit. For if Free Will can perform good works and merit reward, what need is there of grace?

I mention this only to show how easily even men of great learning

may overlook what is obvious. It also demonstrates how little weight human authority carries in divine matters, where the authority of God alone is decisive.

There are two matters requiring consideration here.

First, the nature of the New Testament.

Secondly, the question of merit.

We shall consider each briefly.

The New Testament properly consists of promises and exhortations, just as the Old Testament properly consists of laws and threatenings.

The Gospel proclaimed in the New Testament is the announcement that the Holy Spirit, grace, forgiveness of sins, and salvation through Christ crucified are freely offered to sinners. These blessings come entirely through the mercy of God the Father, bestowed upon those who deserve nothing but condemnation.

After these promises come exhortations.

These exhortations are directed not toward obtaining justification but toward encouraging those who have already been justified and received mercy. Believers are exhorted to abound in the fruits of the Spirit, to practise love and good works, and to endure patiently the cross and the afflictions of this present life.

This is the true substance of the New Testament.

Yet Erasmus appears to understand very little of these things.

He fails to distinguish properly between the Old Testament and the New. Everywhere he sees only commands designed to improve human behaviour. Of the new birth, the new creation, regeneration, and the work of the Holy Spirit, he appears to know nothing.

I confess that I am astonished that a man who has devoted so much study to Scripture should understand so little of its central message.

Therefore the words:

"Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven."

have no more agreement with Free Will than light has with darkness.

Christ was not speaking to Free Will. He was speaking to His apostles—men who had already received grace, been justified, and been appointed to the ministry of the Word. They stood in the highest position of spiritual privilege and were being encouraged to endure suffering for Christ's sake.

Our present dispute concerns something entirely different.

We are discussing Free Will apart from grace—that condition of man

which is instructed by the law and made aware of its own helplessness, so that it might flee to the promises offered in the Gospel.

Section LXX

Merit And Reward

As for merit and reward, what are they but promises?

A promise proves only this: if a certain thing is done, a reward will follow.

It does not prove that the thing can be done.

The real question before us is not what reward shall be given, nor how it shall be bestowed, but whether man possesses the ability to perform the works for which the reward is promised.

This is the point that must be proved.

Otherwise we reason as absurdly as the following examples:

A prize is offered to those who run a race; therefore everyone is able to run in such a way as to obtain it.

If Caesar conquers the Turks, he shall possess Syria; therefore Caesar can and will conquer the Turks.

If Free Will overcomes sin, it shall be holy before God; therefore Free Will is already holy before God.

Such arguments are plainly ridiculous.

Let us therefore leave behind these empty conclusions and consider the matter more carefully.

It is said that necessity excludes merit and reward.

This is true if by necessity we mean compulsion.

No one rewards a man for what he does unwillingly.

But if by necessity we mean certainty or immutability, the argument fails.

Those who willingly do good or evil receive the consequences of their actions, even though they cannot alter their nature by their own power.

Scripture declares:

"Thou shalt render to every man according to his works." (Proverbs 24:12)

The principle is simple.

If a man remains beneath the water, he will drown.

If he escapes from it, he will live.

The consequence follows necessarily from the condition.

To speak briefly, merit and reward may be considered either in terms of worthiness or consequence.

If we speak of worthiness, then Free Will has no merit at all.

For if Free Will cannot will good apart from grace, but performs good only through grace, then every good work, every merit, and every reward belongs to grace alone.

Here the Diatribe once again contradicts itself.

Having previously argued that Free Will can do nothing good, it now attempts to establish its freedom by appealing to merit and reward.

In doing so, it condemns itself by its own argument.

If, however, we speak of consequences, then every good deed and every evil deed receives its appropriate outcome.

This is where confusion often arises.

Men begin speaking of rewards and immediately turn the discussion toward worthiness, when the real question concerns consequences.

God's judgment upon the wicked remains certain whether they expect it or not.

Hell remains their portion even though they hate the thought of it and curse the very idea.

Likewise, the kingdom remains prepared for the righteous even when they neither seek it nor think about it.

The kingdom was prepared for them by their Father before they were born, indeed before the foundation of the world.

If believers performed good works in order to obtain the kingdom, they would never receive it. Such a spirit belongs not to the children of God but to those who seek their own advantage, even in their service to God.

The true children of God do good freely, seeking neither reward nor personal gain, but only the glory of God and obedience to His will.

Were it possible that there were neither heaven nor hell, they would still desire to serve Him.

This truth is clearly confirmed by the words of Christ:

"Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Matthew 25:34)

How can a man merit what was prepared for him before he existed?

Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that the kingdom merits its heirs than that the heirs merit the kingdom.

The kingdom was prepared beforehand.

The heirs were chosen for the kingdom beforehand.

The kingdom does not come into existence because of its heirs; rather, the heirs exist because of the kingdom prepared for them.

In the same way, hell may be said to prepare its own children.

For Christ declares:

"Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matthew 25:41)

Thus both salvation and condemnation stand upon God's judgment, not upon the supposed merits of Free Will.

Section LXXI

Of Scripture Rewards, Promises, And The Purpose

But the Diatribe asks: What then is meant by all those passages of Scripture which promise a kingdom and threaten hell? Why does Scripture so frequently speak of rewards?

For example:

"Thou hast thy reward."

"I am thy exceeding great reward."

And again:

"Who rendereth to every man according to his work."

Likewise Paul writes:

"Who will render to every man according to his deeds: to them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life." (Romans 2:6–7)

The answer is straightforward.

Such passages prove only that rewards follow certain actions. They do not prove that men possess the ability to perform those actions by their own power, nor do they establish the worthiness of human merit.

Those who do good do not act from a mercenary spirit, seeking eternal life as a wage earned by their labour. Rather, they seek eternal life in the sense that they walk in the path that leads to it. Their seeking is a pursuit born of desire, diligence, and faith—a pressing forward toward that which God has promised.

Scripture declares what follows a godly or ungodly life in order to instruct, warn, encourage, and awaken men.

Just as:

"By the law is the knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:20)

yet the law does not thereby prove that we possess the power to fulfil its demands, so these promises and warnings teach what follows obedience and disobedience without attributing any merit to man himself.

The commandments of God teach us what we ought to do and reveal what we cannot do.

Likewise, the promises of reward reveal what shall follow obedience, while the threatenings reveal what shall follow sin.

The one instructs; the other encourages and warns.

Thus the righteous are comforted, strengthened, and encouraged to persevere in doing good and enduring evil. They are taught not to grow weary or lose heart.

As Paul exhorts the Corinthians:

"Be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Likewise God encouraged Abraham, saying:

"I am thy exceeding great reward." (Genesis 15:1)

Such promises serve as consolation. They assure believers that their service is pleasing to God and that no labour performed in faith will be lost. It is no small comfort to know that God delights in His people and that His favour guarantees a blessed outcome, even when present circumstances seem contrary to it.

Section LXXII

Why God Uses His Word

To this same purpose belong all those passages that speak of hope and expectation.

The godly do not hope because of the words themselves, nor do the promises come to pass because they hope. Rather, they hope because God has promised, and the promises are certain because God is faithful.

In the same way, the warnings of judgment are given to terrify the wicked and bring them low, so that they may cease from sin and not become hardened through pride and false security.

At this point human reason may object.

If the human will can do nothing apart from the Spirit, why does God

employ words, promises, warnings, and exhortations? Why not simply accomplish His purpose directly?

If the Spirit is absent, the will remains powerless whether the Word is present or not.

If the Spirit is present, the will is made effective by the Spirit rather than by the Word itself.

Why then does God use the Word at all?

The answer is simple.

Because this is the way that pleases God.

He has chosen not to give His Spirit apart from the Word, but through the Word.

In this way He permits us to be fellow workers in His service. We proclaim outwardly what He alone accomplishes inwardly by His Spirit.

The external voice sounds in the ears of men; the Spirit works within the heart wherever it pleases Him.

Certainly God could work without the Word if He wished. But He has chosen not to do so.

And who are we to demand an explanation of the divine will?

It is enough for us to know that this is God's appointed method. Our duty is not to question His wisdom but to reverence, love, and adore His will.

Christ Himself provides no other explanation when He says:

"I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight." (Matthew 11:25–26)

Likewise, God could sustain our lives without bread.

Indeed, Scripture teaches:

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4)

Yet God has chosen to nourish us by means of bread.

In the same manner, He nourishes His people inwardly by His Spirit while employing the outward ministry of the Word as His appointed means.

It is evident, therefore, that merit cannot be established from the promise of reward.

Nor can Free Will be established from merit.

Indeed, even if merit were granted, together with all the usual

arguments of human reason—such as:

"The command is given in vain."

"The promise is made in vain."

"The threat is spoken in vain."

unless Free Will exists—none of these arguments would prove what the Diatribe desires.

For if they prove anything, they prove that Free Will can accomplish everything by its own power.

But since the Diatribe itself has already admitted that Free Will cannot accomplish everything by its own power, all these arguments collapse.

The same difficulty remains:

If Free Will cannot perform what is commanded, then commands, promises, and warnings would still appear unnecessary according to human reasoning.

Thus the Diatribe continually argues against itself whenever it seeks to argue against us.

God alone, through His Spirit, produces both the works and the rewards. Yet He makes both known through His outward Word, proclaiming them openly before the whole world.

By this means His power and glory are displayed, while our weakness and helplessness are exposed.

The wicked, the unbelieving, and the ignorant hear these things but despise them.

Only those who fear God receive them into their hearts and hold them fast in faith.

Section LXXIII

The Fruits Belong To Those Who Receive Them

It would be tedious to repeat every command and exhortation from the New Testament which the Diatribe gathers together, only to attach its usual conclusion that such passages are pointless, superfluous, coldly useless, ridiculous, or meaningless if the human will is not free.

I have already answered this objection so often that it becomes wearisome to repeat it.

Such arguments prove nothing.

Or, if they prove anything at all, they prove far more than the Diatribe wishes to establish. They prove a Free Will capable of accomplishing

everything by its own power.

But this destroys the very position of the Diatribe itself. For it originally set out to defend a Free Will which cannot do good apart from grace and which remains in bondage to sin. Yet in its arguments it continually assumes a Free Will capable of fulfilling every command of God.

Thus it repeatedly forgets its own position and argues against itself.

One example is its appeal to the words of Christ:

"By their fruits ye shall know them." (Matthew 7:16, 20)

The Diatribe argues that Christ calls these works "their fruits," and therefore they must belong to men themselves. If all things happen by necessity, it says, they cannot truly be ours.

But what kind of argument is this?

Are not many things rightly called ours even though we did not create them ourselves?

Why should not those works be called ours which God has bestowed upon us through His Spirit?

By the same reasoning, should we refuse to call Christ ours because we did not create Him but merely received Him?

Or should we deny that our eyes, hands, and feet are our own because we did not make them?

Paul asks:

"What hast thou that thou didst not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7)

If everything we possess has been received, must we therefore conclude that nothing belongs to us?

Or shall we claim that we ourselves created everything that is called ours?

Indeed, if good works are ours only because we produced them independently, then where is grace? Where is the Holy Spirit?

Christ does not say:

"By fruits partly their own and partly God's ye shall know them."

Rather, He simply calls them their fruits because they belong to those in whom they are found.

Thus the argument of the Diatribe is itself the thing it condemns—ridiculous, useless, superfluous, and absurd. By such reasoning the holy words of God are twisted and profaned.

The same treatment is given to Christ's prayer upon the cross:

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

The Diatribe argues:

Would it not have been more appropriate for Christ to excuse them by saying that they lacked Free Will and therefore could not act otherwise?

Yet this argument once again proves nothing about the kind of Free Will under discussion.

We are speaking of a will incapable of willing any spiritual good.

The Diatribe instead assumes a will capable of doing everything.

Moreover, Christ's words directly oppose its position.

He says:

"They know not what they do."

How can a man will what he does not know?

How can he desire what he does not understand?

If anything proves the helplessness of Free Will, surely it is this. Not only can it not choose the good, it does not even recognise the evil it commits or the good it rejects.

Could language be any clearer?

If even these words of Christ can be made to support Free Will, then any words can be made to support it.

One might just as easily argue for Free Will from:

"And the earth was without form, and void." (Genesis 1:2)

or:

"And on the seventh day God ended his work." (Genesis 2:2)

If such methods are allowed, Scripture ceases to mean anything at all.

To handle God's Word in this manner reveals a mind that treats both God and man with contempt and deserves no indulgence.

Section LXXIV

The power to become the sons of God

The Diatribe next appeals to the words of John chapter one:

"To them gave he power to become the sons of God."

It asks, "How can power be given to become the sons of God if there is no freedom in the human will?"

Yet this passage, like so much of John's Gospel, is actually a mighty hammer that crushes Free-will. Nevertheless, the Diatribe presents it as support for its cause. Let us therefore examine the passage carefully.

John is not speaking about any human work, whether great or small. He is speaking about the complete renewal and transformation of a

person—from being a child of the devil to becoming a child of God. In this work, man is entirely passive, using the term in its proper sense. He contributes nothing and accomplishes nothing. Rather, he is acted upon and transformed.

John is speaking of what we are made to be. He teaches that we become the sons of God through a power given to us from above, not through some supposed power of Free-will residing within us.

Yet our friend the Diatribe concludes from this passage that Free-will possesses such power that it can make us the sons of God. Otherwise, it suggests that John's words would be meaningless and useless. But who has ever attributed such power to Free-will? Who has claimed that Free-will can make us the children of God, especially when the very Free-will that the Diatribe seeks to defend cannot even will that which is good?

Let this argument join the many others already examined. Like the rest, it proves nothing, unless it proves what the Diatribe itself denies—namely, that Free-will can accomplish all things.

John's meaning is straightforward. By the coming of Christ into the world through the Gospel, grace was offered freely and no works were required. Through this Gospel, an opportunity was given to all men to become the sons of God, if they believed.

But as for this willing and believing, Free-will neither knew of it nor imagined it beforehand. Therefore, it certainly could not produce it by its own power.

How could human reason ever have discovered that faith in Jesus Christ, the God-Man, was necessary for salvation? Even now, fallen reason cannot receive or believe such a truth, even if the whole creation were to proclaim with one voice that there is a Person who is both God and man. On the contrary, reason is offended by such a message, as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians chapter one. Therefore, it is impossible that Free-will should either desire it or believe it of itself.

John, then, is not proclaiming the power of Free-will. He is proclaiming the riches of the Kingdom of God offered to the world through the Gospel. At the same time, he shows how few actually receive it. This very rejection reveals the hostility of Free-will toward the Gospel. Its power amounts to nothing more than this: Satan rules over it and causes it to reject the grace of God and the Spirit who fulfils the Law.

Thus, the much-vaunted "endeavour" and "desire" of Free-will prove utterly incapable of fulfilling the Law.

Later we shall show more fully what a mighty thunderbolt this passage from John is against Free-will. Yet I cannot help being astonished that texts which so plainly and powerfully overthrow Free-will are continually brought forward by the Diatribe in its defence.

Its blindness is such that it makes no distinction between the promises of the Gospel and the commands of the Law. It attempts to establish Free-will by the words of the Law and, even more absurdly, seeks to confirm it by the promises of God.

The explanation is simple. The Diatribe conducts this whole discussion with remarkable carelessness and indifference. It matters little to it whether grace stands or falls, whether Free-will is overthrown or exalted, provided that by its empty words it can serve the interests of those who oppose the truth and bring reproach upon the cause itself.

Section LXXV

Paul And The Bondage Of The Will

The Diatribe next appeals to Paul himself, who is perhaps the most determined opponent of Free Will in all of Scripture. Yet even Paul is pressed into service as a defender of Free Will.

It cites the words:

"Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" (Romans 2:4)

The Diatribe then asks:

How can the despising of God's command be blamed upon man if there is no Free Will?

How can God call men to repentance if He Himself is the author of their impenitence?

How can condemnation be just if the Judge compels men to do evil?

I answer that these questions trouble the Diatribe far more than they trouble us.

For according to its own position, Free Will cannot will any good thing and is necessarily bound in the service of sin.

How then can the despising of God's command be charged against the will if that will possesses no liberty and can do nothing but serve sin?

How can God call men to repentance if, as the Diatribe teaches, they are unable of themselves to repent?

How can condemnation be just if man lacks the power to perform what God requires?

All these arguments therefore recoil upon the head of the Diatribe itself.

Or, if they prove anything, they prove far more than the Diatribe intends. They prove a Free Will capable of accomplishing everything by its own power.

Yet this is precisely what the Diatribe denies.

Thus human reason continually entangles itself in contradictions.

The apostle's purpose in such passages is not to establish human ability but to expose human inability.

Through commands, warnings, and threats, he brings proud and self-confident sinners to a knowledge of themselves. He reveals their helplessness and guilt so that, humbled by the knowledge of sin, they may be prepared to receive grace.

Indeed, what need is there to examine individually every passage from Paul's writings which the Diatribe produces?

Almost all of them consist of commands, exhortations, warnings, or conditional statements addressed to believers.

From these passages the Diatribe constructs an imaginary Free Will possessing powers that Paul never attributes to it.

By means of its conclusions, it invents a Free Will capable, without grace, of doing all that Paul commands.

But Christians are not led by Free Will.

They are led by the Spirit of God.

As Paul declares:

"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." (Romans 8:14)

To be led is not to lead.

It is not the activity of one directing himself, but of one being directed by another.

The believer is moved by the Spirit of God, just as a saw or an axe is moved by the hand of the craftsman who uses it.

The instrument acts, yet the power belongs to the one who wields it.

Lest anyone should doubt what I teach on this subject, the Diatribe proceeds to quote my own words.

I readily acknowledge them.

I maintain that the article of Wycliffe was wrongly condemned by the

Council of Constance—that assembly which called itself a council but acted more like a faction and conspiracy.

The article declared that all things happen according to necessity; that is, according to the immutable will of God; and that man's will, though not compelled by force, cannot of itself do good.

In fact, the Diatribe itself is compelled to agree with this position whenever it admits that Free Will cannot by its own power will what is good and that it necessarily serves sin.

Thus, while seeking to oppose me, it continually finds itself defending the very position it wishes to deny.

So much may suffice in answer to the first part of the Diatribe, in which it has attempted to establish the doctrine of Free Will.

We now turn to the second part, where it undertakes to refute our arguments and to defend itself against those Scriptures which overthrow Free Will altogether.

There we shall see what human wisdom can accomplish when set against the thunder and lightning of God's Word.

DISCUSSION PART TWO

Section LXXVI

The Bondage Of The Will

SECOND PART. Sec. LXXVI to Sect. CXII.

The Scriptures Which Overthrow Free Will

THE DIATRIBE'S ATTACK UPON THE CHIEF SCRIPTURES

Having gathered together a vast number of Scripture passages in support of Free Will, the Diatribe now advances as though it had assembled a mighty army. By this display it seeks to encourage all those who stand on the side of Free Will and to intimidate those who oppose it.

Having completed this impressive show of force, it imagines that only a small and insignificant company remains to defend the opposite position. Therefore it selects only two passages of Scripture which it regards as the strongest arguments against Free Will, believing that these can easily be disposed of.

The first is:

"The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh." (Exodus 9:12)

The second is:

"Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." (Malachi 1:2–3)

Both passages are discussed at length by Paul in Romans chapter 9.

Yet, according to the judgment of the Diatribe, the apostle's treatment of these texts appears almost worthless. One might suppose that Paul had laboured in vain and that the Holy Spirit Himself lacked sufficient skill to defend His own cause.

Indeed, if the Holy Spirit had depended upon the wisdom of human rhetoric, there would be reason to fear that He might abandon the contest altogether and surrender the field to Free Will before the battle had even begun.

For my part, I willingly take my place beside these two passages and join their defence.

Nor do I think our position requires a great multitude of supporting arguments.

When one truth is sufficient to overthrow error, numbers are unnecessary.

If a single passage of Scripture proves that Free Will cannot stand, then all the armies assembled by the Diatribe are of no avail.

One clear word from God outweighs a thousand arguments devised by men.

For in matters of divine truth, victory is not determined by the number of witnesses but by the authority of the One who speaks.

Therefore, if either of these passages establishes our position, the whole cause of Free Will falls to the ground, however many arguments may be gathered to support it.

We shall therefore examine these texts carefully and allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves..

Section LXXVII

The danger of inventing tropes

At this point in the discussion, the Diatribe introduces a new method of escaping the force of the clearest passages of Scripture.

Whenever a text appears to oppose Free Will, it claims that the words must be understood figuratively. Thus, passages which speak plainly are transformed into tropes and figures of speech whenever they become inconvenient.

Earlier, when defending Free Will, the Diatribe attempted to evade the force of commands and conditions by means of deductions, conclusions, and comparisons. Now, when confronted by passages that support our position, it adopts a different strategy and twists the very words of Scripture themselves.

Like Proteus of old, it changes shape whenever it is pressed.

Indeed, it complains that we do the same thing ourselves. It points to passages such as:

"Stretch forth thine hand." (Exodus 8:5)

and

"Make you a new heart." (Ezekiel 18:31)

and accuses us of interpreting them as though they meant:

"Grace shall stretch forth thy hand,"

or,

"Grace shall make you a new heart."

Thus it argues that if we are permitted to use such interpretations, then it ought to be permitted to follow the interpretations of the approved

doctors and fathers.

But observe what has happened.

The dispute is no longer about the text itself. It is no longer about conclusions or arguments. It has become a dispute about interpretations, figures, and imagined meanings.

If this principle is allowed, where shall we ever find a clear text of Scripture?

What passage will remain secure?

What article of faith can ever be established if every word may be transformed into a trope whenever someone chooses?

The doctrine of Free Will would then remain forever uncertain, supported not by the plain testimony of Scripture but by human inventions and conflicting interpretations.

My position is altogether different.

No trope should be admitted unless the text itself requires it, either because the literal meaning produces an obvious contradiction or because it conflicts with a clear article of faith.

Otherwise, the natural and grammatical meaning of the words must stand.

For language was given by God to communicate truth plainly.

If every reader may invent tropes according to his own preference, Scripture becomes nothing more than a reed shaken by the wind.

Nothing could then be established with certainty.

Any doctrine could be overthrown by some newly invented interpretation.

For this reason unnecessary tropes must be regarded as dangerous and avoided wherever possible.

History itself teaches this lesson.

Consider Origen. His excessive use of allegory and figurative interpretation opened the door to endless confusion.

Consider the Arians, who by means of their interpretations diminished the true deity of Christ.

Consider the controversies of our own day concerning the words:

"This is my body."

One man finds a figure in the word "this," another in the word "is," another in the word "body."

The result is confusion without end.

Indeed, I have observed that nearly every heresy has arisen not from

the simplicity of Scripture but from man's refusal to accept that simplicity.

Men abandon the plain meaning and then invent interpretations from their own imagination.

The fault lies not with Scripture but with its interpreters.

Nor have I ever interpreted the passages cited by the Diatribe in the manner it alleges.

I have never said that:

"Stretch forth thine hand"

means:

"Grace shall stretch forth thy hand."

Nor that:

"Make you a new heart"

means:

"Grace shall make you a new heart."

My argument has always been much simpler.

The command means exactly what it says.

It tells us what we ought to do.

It reveals our duty.

That is the proper function of a command.

But the Diatribe immediately transforms every command into a declaration of human ability.

It reasons as follows:

"Stretch forth thine hand" means that man is able to stretch forth his hand.

"Make you a new heart" means that man is able to make himself a new heart.

"Believe in Christ" means that man is able of himself to believe in Christ.

Thus it treats commands as though they were statements of ability.

No grammarian would tolerate such reasoning.

Yet these interpretations are presented as the wisdom of approved doctors and ancient authorities.

The truth is that the Diatribe finds such methods convenient because certainty is not its concern.

Its aim is not to establish truth but to avoid those passages which most strongly oppose its position.

But I am concerned with certainty.

I seek a truth upon which consciences may safely rest.

Therefore it is not enough for someone to say that a passage may be interpreted figuratively.

The question is whether it must be interpreted figuratively.

Unless that necessity can be demonstrated, the plain meaning remains.

For Scripture says:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart." (Exodus 4:21)

The meaning of the words is straightforward.

You tell me that they really mean:

"I will permit Pharaoh's heart to be hardened."

Very well. I acknowledge that such an interpretation can be suggested.

But where is the proof that it is correct?

Where is the evidence that Moses or Paul intended it?

That is the real question.

We are not discussing what a reader might imagine a passage to mean.

We are asking what the Holy Spirit intended to say.

A troubled conscience will not be satisfied with possibilities and conjectures.

God says:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart."

A commentator replies:

"That means He merely permitted Pharaoh to harden himself."

By what authority?

On what grounds?

Where is the necessity for abandoning the natural meaning of the words?

To twist the Word of God without necessity or authority is both dangerous and irreverent.

A troubled soul cannot be comforted by appeals to Origen or Jerome.

It requires certainty.

If Moses, Paul, and the Holy Spirit have chosen to speak in this way, it is not for us to dismiss their words as curious or unnecessary.

The question is not whether such interpretations can be imagined.

The question is whether they are true.

The Plain Meaning Of Scripture Must Stand

This miserable refuge of tropes, therefore, offers the Diatribe no escape.

Our Proteus must be held firmly and compelled to prove that a figure of speech truly exists in these passages. And that proof must come either from the clearest Scriptures or from the most undeniable evidence. Mere opinion, even if supported by the labour of many centuries, carries no authority with us.

We insist that there is no figure of speech here at all, but that the Word of God must be understood according to its plain and natural meaning.

For Scripture has not been given to us so that every man may twist and turn its words according to his own pleasure.

If such liberty were allowed, what doctrine could remain certain?

What passage of Scripture could not be transformed into something entirely different?

One might say:

"God created the heaven and the earth"

means merely that He arranged what already existed.

Or one might claim it refers to angels and devils, or to the righteous and the wicked.

If this method were permitted, anyone could become a theologian merely by opening a book.

Let this therefore be established as a fixed principle:

Unless it can be proved that a passage must be understood figuratively, the words are to be received according to their plain meaning.

And if the Diatribe cannot prove that such a figure exists in these passages, then our interpretation stands.

Once this point is secured, all the arguments which the Diatribe seeks to overthrow remain untouched, and its whole refutation collapses.

For example, when the words:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart"

are explained to mean that God's patience merely provided Pharaoh with an occasion to become more hardened, such an explanation may sound attractive.

But where is the proof?

I am not asking whether such an interpretation can be imagined.

I am asking whether it is true.

Likewise, when Paul writes:

"He hath mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth." (Romans 9:18)

the Diatribe explains this to mean that God hardens by delaying punishment and shows mercy by sending afflictions that lead to repentance.

Again, where is the proof?

Or take the words of Isaiah:

"O LORD, why hast thou made us to err from thy ways, and hardened our heart from thy fear?" (Isaiah 63:17)

Suppose Jerome, following Origen, interprets this as meaning that God causes men to err merely by not immediately recalling them from error.

Who guarantees that Jerome and Origen are correct?

I have determined to build my arguments upon Scripture itself and not upon the authority of teachers, however celebrated they may be.

Indeed, among all the ancient writers, few have handled the Scriptures with less certainty or greater extravagance than Origen and Jerome.

In short, this new method of interpretation throws everything into confusion.

When God says:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart,"

we are told to understand:

"Pharaoh hardens himself because I patiently endure him."

When Scripture says:

"God hardens,"

we are told to understand:

"We harden ourselves because God delays punishment."

When Isaiah says:

"Thou hast made us to err,"

we are told to understand:

"We made ourselves to err because Thou didst not immediately restrain us."

By the same reasoning, mercy no longer means mercy.

It no longer means grace, forgiveness, justification, or deliverance.

Instead, mercy becomes punishment, and wrath becomes kindness.

Such interpretations turn all language upside down.

According to this method, God showed mercy to Israel when He sent them into captivity because He punished them and called them to repentance through suffering.

But when He delivered them and restored them to their land, He did not show mercy at all; rather, He hardened them by treating them kindly.

Likewise, God's sending of Christ into the world would no longer be an act of mercy but an act of hardening, because many used that mercy as an occasion for unbelief.

On the other hand, the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of the Jews would become acts of mercy because they involved punishment.

Even the final judgment would be transformed.

The saints entering heaven would be an act of hardening because God's goodness might be abused.

The wicked being cast into hell would become an act of mercy because punishment might lead them to repentance.

Who has ever heard of such definitions of mercy and wrath?

These interpretations reverse the ordinary meaning of language and overthrow the common understanding of Scripture.

They make God's goodness into wrath and His wrath into goodness.

Section LXXIX

Pharaoh Proves The Falsehood Of These Tropes

But this is the most remarkable claim of all: that God is said to harden sinners when He shows them patience and kindness, but is said to have mercy upon them when He visits them with affliction and severity in order to bring them to repentance.

Let us test this theory by the very example before us.

What did God leave undone in His dealings with Pharaoh?

Did He not afflict him?

Did He not punish him?

Did He not repeatedly call him to repentance?

Are not ten plagues recorded in the history of Exodus?

If, therefore, it is true that God shows mercy whenever He punishes and calls a sinner to repentance, then surely God showed mercy to Pharaoh.

Why then does Scripture not say:

"I will have mercy upon Pharaoh"?

Instead it says:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart."

And this declaration is made while God is sending plague after plague upon him.

According to the interpretation of the Diatribe, God should have said:

"I will show mercy to Pharaoh."

Yet God says:

"I will harden him."

Thus, according to this interpretation, God is actually calling mercy hardening and hardening mercy.

What could be more absurd?

Where now are these tropes?

Where now are Origen and Jerome?

Where are all those celebrated authorities whom I am accused of opposing?

For the plain words of Scripture overturn their explanations.

Such confusion arises whenever men treat the Word of God lightly and refuse to submit to its obvious meaning.

The account of Pharaoh itself proves beyond dispute that these interpretations are mere inventions.

The words:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart"

must signify something altogether different from either kindness or punishment alone.

For both kindness and punishment were abundantly displayed in God's dealings with Pharaoh.

Consider the severity of God's judgments.

What greater punishments could have been inflicted?

Pharaoh witnessed miracle after miracle and plague after plague. Moses himself declares that such wonders had never before been seen.

More than once Pharaoh was shaken by these judgments.

More than once he appeared to repent.

More than once he confessed his sin.

Yet none of these things produced a lasting change.

He was moved for a moment, but he did not persevere.

Now consider the goodness and patience of God.

How often did God remove the plagues?

How often did He restore peace?

How often did He withdraw judgment after Pharaoh pleaded for relief?

Again and again God showed patience.

Again and again He delayed destruction.

Again and again He returned good for evil.

Yet none of this altered Pharaoh's heart.

Through all these dealings God continued to say:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart."

Therefore, even if we grant everything the Diatribe says about kindness producing hardness and punishment leading to repentance, the problem still remains.

For there is a hardening in Pharaoh's case which neither kindness nor punishment can explain.

God's patience was present.

God's judgments were present.

Yet over and above both stands the divine declaration:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart."

Thus the hardening spoken of by Moses must be something different from the explanation imagined by the Diatribe.

The hardening described in Scripture remains.

The hardening invented by these interpretations is another matter altogether.

Consequently, Moses is speaking of a work of God which cannot be reduced to mere patience, mere punishment, or the opportunities that either may provide.

The text itself compels us to seek a deeper and more serious meaning.

Section LXXX

Even The Diatribe's Explanation Cannot Save Free Will

But since I am compelled to contend with inventions and shadows, let me for a moment deal with them on their own ground.

Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that the Diatribe's interpretation is correct. Let us grant, although it cannot be proved, that God is said to harden when He patiently bears with sinners and delays punishment.

Even if this were admitted, the Diatribe gains nothing.

For two truths still remain firmly established.

First, man still serves sin by necessity.

The Diatribe itself has repeatedly acknowledged that Free Will cannot will any spiritual good.

If this is true, then the patience and goodness of God do not make Free Will better by its own power. Left to itself, it continues in its corruption and becomes worse rather than better.

Therefore the conclusion remains unchanged.

Whatever man does, he does necessarily according to the condition of his fallen nature.

The bondage of the will is untouched.

Secondly, God still appears no less responsible for the outcome than before.

For if God knows that Free Will cannot choose what is good, and if He knows that His patience only leaves the sinner to become more hardened, then His continued forbearance raises exactly the same question which the Diatribe seeks to avoid.

Why does He continue to bear with the sinner?

Why does He not change him?

Why does He not give the Spirit by which alone the sinner can be renewed?

For if God is able to remedy the condition and yet does not do so, what has really been gained by changing the word "harden" into "forbear"?

The difficulty remains exactly where it was before.

Indeed, according to this interpretation, God appears almost more severe.

For He sees the sinner unable to do good.

He sees him becoming worse under continued patience.

Yet He continues to withhold the remedy.

No one can compel God to act against His will.

Therefore, if the remedy is not given, it follows that God has not willed to give it.

The question cannot be escaped.

Once it is admitted that God does all things according to His own will, and once it is admitted that Free Will cannot will good, all attempts either to excuse God or to defend Free Will prove futile.

The language of Free Will remains the same:

"I cannot do good, and God will not help me. What then can I do?"

If God visits me with affliction, I gain nothing unless He also gives His Spirit.

Without the Spirit I must remain what I am and become even worse.

Yet the Spirit is not given.

God could give it if He wished.

No one prevents Him.

Therefore, if it is withheld, it must be because He has not willed to bestow it.

Thus even the Diatribe's own explanation leaves us precisely where we began.

The sovereignty of God remains.

The impotence of Free Will remains.

And all the efforts made to escape these conclusions accomplish nothing.

Section LXXXI

The Similitudes Of The Sun And The Rain Do Not Help Free Will

But neither do the illustrations brought forward by the Diatribe prove its case.

It argues:

"As under the same sun, clay is hardened and wax is softened; and as under the same rain, cultivated ground produces fruit while uncultivated ground produces thorns; so, under the same long-suffering of God, some men are hardened while others are converted."

At first sight this may appear persuasive, but it entirely misses the point under discussion.

We are not speaking of two different kinds of Free Will, one naturally good and the other naturally evil.

We are speaking of one and the same Free Will in all men.

According to the Diatribe's own definition, Free Will cannot will what is spiritually good.

If that is true, then all men stand alike.

Free Will is not wax in one man and clay in another.

It is not cultivated ground in one and uncultivated ground in another.

In its natural condition it is nothing but clay and nothing but uncultivated ground.

Indeed, Paul says that the potter does not make one vessel from one lump and another vessel from another lump.

Rather:

"Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" (Romans 9:21)

The whole argument rests upon one lump, not many.

Therefore, if Free Will is the same in all men, and if it cannot will good, then it follows that it becomes worse under God's patience rather than better.

Just as clay grows harder beneath the sun, and uncultivated ground produces more thorns under the rain, so fallen man becomes increasingly hardened unless God intervenes by grace.

The difficulty therefore remains exactly where it was before.

If all men possess the same powerless Free Will, why does one receive grace while another does not?

Why does one believe while another remains hardened?

If all that is presented to men is God's goodness, patience, warnings, and judgments, and if Free Will is equally powerless in every person, then the difference cannot arise from Free Will itself.

The Diatribe has already conceded that point.

Therefore the difference must lie elsewhere.

It must lie in God.

For if Free Will itself determines who receives grace and who rejects it, then election disappears altogether.

God no longer chooses.

Man chooses.

Divine election is replaced by human decision.

And once God is deprived of His sovereign choice, what remains except blind chance?

Indeed, we eventually arrive at the absurd conclusion that men are saved or lost without any certain purpose of God at all.

God merely places before all men His goodness and His judgments, leaves the outcome undecided, and waits to see what they will choose.

Meanwhile, He Himself remains a spectator.

Such a god bears a striking resemblance to the god imagined by the philosophers.

It is the god of Aristotle—a god who remains at rest while the affairs of men proceed independently of his will.

He neither governs nor determines, but merely observes.

Human reason can imagine no other god.

Because reason itself is asleep concerning divine things, it imagines God asleep as well.

It supposes that He neither chooses nor directs nor governs, but leaves everything to the uncertain decisions of men.

This is what inevitably follows whenever we attempt to defend God by means of human speculation rather than by reverent submission to His revealed Word.

Instead of honouring the mysteries of His majesty, we pry into them.

Instead of worshipping, we speculate.

And in attempting to excuse God, we end by accusing Him.

We imagine ourselves wise, yet we become guilty of a thousand blasphemies.

Thus, rather than defending either God or ourselves, we speak foolishly against both.

Here we may see the true result of the Diatribe's interpretation.

Its theory not only diminishes God's sovereignty but also contradicts its own definition of Free Will.

Earlier it taught that Free Will is alike powerless in all men.

Now it speaks as though one will were cultivated and another uncultivated, one prepared and another unprepared.

In doing so, it introduces two different kinds of Free Will.

One is incapable of doing good.

The other can somehow respond rightly before grace arrives.

But this directly contradicts its earlier position.

Thus the Diatribe destroys with one hand what it built with the other.

And whenever we refuse to attribute hardening, mercy, election, and salvation to the sovereign will of God alone, we inevitably end by attributing these things to Free Will itself.

The result is that Free Will acquires the very power which the Diatribe originally denied it possessed.

Therefore these illustrations of the sun and the rain accomplish nothing.

A Christian might employ them more appropriately in another way.

The sun and the rain may be compared to the Gospel itself, as Scripture often does.

The Word of God falls upon all alike.

Yet it produces different results.

The cultivated field may represent the elect, who are built up and strengthened by the Word.

The uncultivated field may represent the reprobate, who are offended and hardened by the same Word.

In that case the illustration has value.

But if we are speaking of Free Will itself, then the conclusion remains unchanged.

In every man, apart from grace, Free Will is uncultivated ground.

It belongs not to the kingdom of God but to the kingdom of Satan.

And until God Himself renews the heart, it can produce nothing but thorns.

Section LXXXII

Reason's Offence At The Sovereignty Of God

Let us now examine the real reason why this figurative interpretation was invented in the first place.

The Diatribe argues that it seems absurd that God, who is both just and good, should harden a man's heart in order to display His power through that man's wickedness.

It appeals to Origen, who admitted that God provided the occasion for Pharaoh's hardening, yet attempted to place all the blame upon Pharaoh himself.

Likewise, Origen drew attention to the words:

"For this cause have I raised thee up." (Exodus 9:16)

He observed that God does not say:

"For this cause have I made thee."

For, he argued, if God had made Pharaoh wicked, Pharaoh could not be blamed, since God declared all His works to be very good.

Such is the reasoning of the Diatribe.

We see, therefore, that one of the chief reasons these passages are rejected is because they appear unreasonable to human understanding.

But I ask, against which article of faith does this supposed absurdity not argue?

What doctrine of Christianity is acceptable to human reason?

It is reason that is offended.

Reason is blind, deaf, irreverent, and rebellious in the things of God.

Yet here she presumes to sit in judgment upon the words and works of her Creator.

If this principle is accepted, we shall soon deny every article of the Christian faith.

For what appears more absurd to reason than the doctrine that God became man?

What seems more foolish than the Son of God being born of a virgin, crucified upon a cross, raised from the dead, and seated at the right hand of the Father?

Paul himself declares that these things are foolishness to the Gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews.

Shall we therefore invent tropes to escape these difficulties?

Shall we join the Arians and say that Christ is not truly God?

Shall we join the Manichees and say that He was not truly man but only an appearance or phantom?

Shall we explain away the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection because reason finds them offensive?

If we proceed in this manner, we shall soon destroy the whole Gospel.

The problem therefore is not with Scripture but with reason.

Nor do these tropes remove the difficulty they are intended to solve.

The same objections remain.

According to the Diatribe's own doctrine, Free Will cannot will what is good and remains in bondage to sin.

God nevertheless commands what man cannot perform.

He judges man for what man cannot avoid.

He withholds the Spirit from many and leaves them in their helpless condition.

Human reason finds all of this offensive.

Therefore the difficulty is not removed at all.

Indeed, if one absurdity is removed, many greater absurdities are introduced in its place.

Reason demands a God who never condemns, never hardens, never judges, and never punishes.

She wants a God who shows mercy to everyone in exactly the same way and who ultimately saves all.

She wants a God without wrath, without judgment, without hell, and without sovereign choice.

Such a God would satisfy reason.

But such a God is not the God of Scripture.

Reason is willing to call God good only if He acts according to her standards.

Faith judges differently.

Faith believes that God is good because He is God.

Faith does not place God before a human tribunal.

Faith bows before His majesty even when it cannot comprehend His ways.

Indeed, faith confesses that God would still be righteous and good even if He were to destroy every son of Adam.

For His goodness is not measured by our understanding but by His own perfect nature.

And what advantage is gained by transferring the blame for hardening from God to Free Will?

What has really changed?

Let all the Free Will in the world exert its utmost strength.

Let it strive with all its powers.

It still cannot produce a single proof that it can avoid hardening when God withholds His Spirit.

Nor can it prove that it can obtain mercy by its own efforts when left to itself.

Whether a man is said to be hardened or deserving of hardening makes little difference if, by necessity, he remains unable to do good.

The Diatribe itself has admitted that Free Will cannot will what is good.

Therefore the problem remains exactly where it was before.

Since these tropes neither remove the difficulty nor preserve the truth, but merely introduce greater confusion while attributing everything to Free Will, they ought to be rejected altogether.

Let us abandon such inventions and hold firmly to the plain and simple Word of God.

For there alone shall we find certainty, while all human explanations leave us only with greater darkness and contradiction.

Section LXXXIII

The Diatribe raises another objection.

It points to the statement in Genesis that all the works of God were

"very good," and observes that God said to Pharaoh, not, "For this purpose have I made thee," but, "For this purpose have I raised thee up."

I answer, first, that when God declared His creation to be "very good," this was before the Fall.

Immediately afterwards, Scripture records how man became corrupted when God withdrew from him and left him to himself.

From that one fallen man came all mankind, including Pharaoh.

As Paul says:

"We were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." (Ephesians 2:3)

Therefore God made Pharaoh from a fallen and corrupt race.

As Solomon writes:

"The Lord hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil." (Proverbs 16:4)

This does not mean that God created wickedness in men. Rather, He forms them from a nature already corrupted by sin and governs them according to His sovereign purpose.

Therefore it is not a valid argument to say:

"God made Pharaoh; therefore Pharaoh could not be wicked."

How could a man born from a corrupt stock be anything other than corrupt?

David confessed:

"Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Psalm 51:5)

And Job asks:

"Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one." (Job 14:4)

Although God is not the author of sin, He continues to create and multiply human nature, which, once deprived of the Spirit, has become defiled by sin.

It is much like a carpenter carving statues from rotten wood. The defect lies in the material, not in the craftsman. Such as the wood is, such will the finished work be. Likewise, God forms men from a nature already corrupted.

Furthermore, if anyone insists that the words "very good" apply even after the Fall, he must remember that this judgment is God's judgment, not man's.

Scripture does not say that man looked upon all God's works and found them good. It says that God did.

Many things that appear evil to us are good in God's sight.

Afflictions, suffering, correction, judgment, and even hell itself appear dreadful to human reason. Yet God employs all these according to His wisdom and righteousness.

What is more excellent than Christ and the Gospel?

Yet what has been more despised by the world?

Therefore the difference lies not in the works themselves but in the eyes that behold them.

Only God fully knows how that which appears evil to us may be good in His sight.

Those who possess the Spirit of God begin to see things from His perspective.

But there is really no need to labour this point further, for the previous answer is sufficient.

Section LXXXIV

Someone may now ask:

How can God be said to work evil in us, just as He is said to harden hearts, give men over to their own desires, or cause them to err?

Strictly speaking, we ought simply to believe what Scripture says and rest there. The works of God are beyond our ability to comprehend fully.

Nevertheless, since human reason insists on questioning these things, I will attempt an explanation.

First, both reason and the Diatribe admit that God works all things in all things.

Nothing acts independently of Him.

Nothing exists outside His power.

Because God is omnipotent, all creation remains under His continual operation.

Now Satan and fallen man, having been abandoned by God, cannot will what is truly good.

They cannot desire what pleases God.

Instead, they continually seek their own interests and pursue their own desires.

Yet neither Satan nor fallen man is nothing.

Their will still exists.

Their nature still exists.

Although corrupted and turned away from God, they remain creatures of God.

That remaining nature, corrupt though it is, remains subject to God's power just as every other creature does.

Therefore, since God works in all things, He necessarily works even in Satan and wicked men.

But He works in them according to what they are.

Because they are corrupt and hostile to God, the actions that proceed from them are likewise corrupt and hostile.

Consider a man riding a lame horse.

The rider directs the horse, yet the horse limps because of its own defect.

The rider is not the cause of the lameness.

He merely directs the animal according to its condition.

The fault lies in the horse, not in the rider.

So it is with God and wicked men.

When God works through evil men, evil actions occur. Yet God Himself remains perfectly good.

He does not become evil by using evil instruments.

The evil proceeds from the corruption of the instrument, not from the goodness of the One who uses it.

It is much like a carpenter attempting to cut wood with a damaged axe.

The poor cut comes from the defect in the tool, not from the skill of the carpenter.

For this reason the wicked man continually sins.

Being carried along under God's sustaining power, he cannot remain inactive.

He must think, desire, choose, and act.

Yet because his nature is corrupt, everything proceeds according to that corruption.

This follows necessarily if God truly is omnipotent.

The wicked man remains God's creature.

Yet because he is alienated from God and lacks the Spirit, he cannot will or do what is spiritually good.

God's omnipotence ensures that no creature can escape His sustaining power and government.

Yet the corruption of the wicked prevents them from being moved

toward good.

God will not cease to be omnipotent because man is sinful.

Nor can sinful man remove his own corruption.

Therefore he continues in sin and error until the Spirit of God renews him.

Meanwhile Satan continues to reign in the hearts of the ungodly and keeps his kingdom secure under this continual operation of divine providence.

Section LXXXV

The Act Of Hardening Explained

We now come to the actual process of hardening itself.

The wicked man, as we have already shown, is like his prince, Satan. He is completely turned in upon himself. He seeks neither God nor the things of God. Instead, he seeks his own wealth, his own glory, his own achievements, his own wisdom, his own power, and, in a word, his own kingdom. He desires only to possess these things and enjoy them in peace.

If anyone opposes him, or seeks to diminish any of these possessions, he immediately reacts with the same hostility toward his opponent that he already bears toward God. The same inward corruption that drives him to seek himself also drives him to anger, resentment, and indignation against anyone who stands in his way.

Nor is he able to overcome this rage any more than he can overcome his selfish desires. He cannot cease seeking his own interests any more than he can cease to exist. As a creature of God, though now corrupted by sin, he remains bound to this condition.

This explains the world's furious opposition to the Gospel of God.

For through the Gospel comes the One who is stronger than the strong man. He enters the palace, overcomes its former possessor, and condemns all those things in which the sinner places his confidence—his glory, his riches, his wisdom, his self-righteousness, and every other object of his trust.

When God speaks and acts contrary to the desires of the wicked, their irritation and resentment increase. This very reaction is what Scripture calls hardening.

Because they are already estranged from God through the corruption

of their fallen nature, they become increasingly hostile when that corruption is challenged. The more their self-centred course is opposed, the more stubborn and rebellious they become.

This is precisely what happened with Pharaoh.

When God declared through Moses that He would take away Pharaoh's power and deliver His people from Egyptian bondage, Pharaoh's heart was provoked and aggravated. The more God confronted him through His Word, the more Pharaoh resisted. The more clearly God revealed His purpose to overthrow Pharaoh's kingdom and rescue Israel, the more fiercely Pharaoh hardened himself.

God did not give Pharaoh His Spirit inwardly to soften and renew him. Instead, He left Pharaoh to the corruption already reigning within him under Satan's dominion. Consequently, his pride grew greater, his anger burned hotter, his arrogance increased, and his contempt became more secure and settled.

Thus Pharaoh's hardening did not arise because God created evil within him, but because God confronted an already corrupt heart with His truth and withheld the grace that alone could have changed it. The more God's Word opposed Pharaoh's wicked desires, the more violently those desires revealed themselves, and in this way his heart became increasingly hardened.

Section LXXXVI

Let no one suppose, therefore, that when Scripture says God hardens men, or works evil in them—for hardening is indeed an evil work—that He creates fresh evil within them, as though a malicious man were to pour poison into a vessel that previously contained none. Such a comparison is entirely misleading.

When people hear us say that God works both good and evil in us, and that we passively submit to His working according to necessity, they often imagine a person who is otherwise good, or at least morally neutral, while God actively places evil within him. This is a complete misunderstanding. They fail to recognise that God is continually active in all His creatures and never ceases from His work. He allows none of His creatures to remain idle or independent of His power.

Whoever wishes to understand this matter rightly should think of it in this way. When God works evil through us, the fault lies not with

God but with the evil already present within us. Since we are corrupt by nature, God, who is perfectly good, carries us along according to the operation of His omnipotent power. Because we are evil instruments, evil actions proceed from us. Yet God Himself remains wholly good. In His wisdom, He overrules and directs even these evil actions for His own glory and for the salvation of His people.

Consider Satan. God did not create Satan's will evil. Rather, He found it evil after Satan had corrupted himself through sin. Leaving that will in its corruption, God nevertheless directs and governs it according to His sovereign purpose. Though God moves and overrules Satan's will, it does not cease to be evil because of that divine government.

The same principle is seen in the case of Shimei and David. David said:

"Let him curse; for the LORD hath said unto him, Curse David."

(2 Samuel xvi. 10)

How could God command such a wicked and malicious act as cursing? There was certainly no outward command instructing Shimei to do so.

David understood the matter differently. He recognised that the Almighty speaks and it is done. God governs all things by His sovereign power and providence. Thus, David looked beyond Shimei himself and recognised the hand of God directing events.

God found Shimei already filled with hatred toward David. His heart was already evil, and his tongue already prepared for blasphemy. At that particular moment, when David was suffering under God's chastening hand, the Lord sovereignly allowed and directed Shimei's wickedness to serve His own purpose.

Thus God used an evil instrument without becoming the author of evil. The blasphemy proceeded from Shimei's corrupt heart, while the government and direction of the event belonged to God.

In this way God's omnipotence carries along the wills of wicked men without destroying their responsibility. The evil remains theirs, while the sovereign direction of all things remains His. Therefore, when Scripture says that God hardens, it does not mean that He creates evil in men who were previously good. Rather, He governs, directs, and overrules those already corrupt, using even their wickedness to accomplish His righteous and holy purposes.

This, then, is the way in which God hardened Pharaoh.

God set before Pharaoh's wicked and rebellious will His Word and His works—things which Pharaoh naturally hated because of the corruption already rooted within him. God did not change Pharaoh's heart by giving him His Spirit. Instead, He continued to confront him through Moses with His commands and judgments.

Meanwhile, Pharaoh looked to his own resources, his wealth, his authority, and his power. Trusting in these things according to his fallen nature, he became increasingly proud and self-confident. On the one hand, he was inflated by a sense of his own greatness. On the other, he despised Moses, who came before him in humility, armed only with the plain Word of God.

As a result, Pharaoh's heart became hardened. The more Moses advanced God's demands and threatened God's judgments, the more Pharaoh was irritated, angered, and provoked.

Left to itself, Pharaoh's evil will might never have been stirred in this way. But because the omnipotent God continually moved and governed all things according to His sovereign power, Pharaoh's will necessarily responded according to its own nature. When God placed before him those things that offended and opposed his sinful desires, Pharaoh could not help but become hardened. Just as he could not escape the operation of God's omnipotence, neither could he escape the hostility and corruption of his own heart.

Thus the hardening of Pharaoh took place in this manner: God presented outwardly to Pharaoh that which his sinful nature hated. At the same time, God continued inwardly to move and sustain the evil will that He found there through His sovereign and irresistible power. Pharaoh, because of the hostility of his heart, could do nothing but oppose what confronted him. He trusted in his own strength and power, and he did so with such stubbornness that he could neither hear nor understand. Under Satan's dominion, he was driven onward like a man possessed or consumed by madness.

If this explanation is accepted, then the argument is won.

Having cast aside the inventions and interpretations of men, I simply accept the words of God as they stand. There is no need either to excuse God or to accuse Him of injustice.

When God says,

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart,"

He speaks plainly and directly. It is as though He said:

"I will act in such a way that Pharaoh's heart shall be hardened. By My operation and by My working, Pharaoh's heart shall become hardened."

And we have already seen how this takes place. By His universal government, God moves Pharaoh's evil will according to its own nature. Pharaoh continues in his chosen course of rebellion and self-will. God does not cease to move him, nor can He cease to uphold and govern His creature. Yet while God presents His Word and His works before him, Pharaoh's corrupt will rushes headlong against them.

Because Pharaoh is evil, he can do nothing but will evil while God moves him according to His omnipotent power.

Therefore, God knew with absolute certainty that Pharaoh would be hardened, and He declared it beforehand with absolute certainty. He knew that Pharaoh's will could neither resist His sovereign government nor cast off its own hostility. He knew that Pharaoh would reject Moses, whom he regarded as his enemy. And because that evil will remained unchanged, Pharaoh would necessarily become more stubborn, more hardened, and more proud. Trusting in his own strength, he would continue to rush against the very truth he despised and refused to receive.

Here, then, this very passage of Scripture confirms that Free-will can do nothing but evil. God, who neither errs through ignorance nor speaks falsely, could confidently foretell Pharaoh's hardening because He knew that an evil will can produce nothing but evil. And as the good which Pharaoh hated was continually set before him, he could only become increasingly hardened in his rebellion.

Section LXXXVIII

The Secret Counsels Of God

At this point, someone may ask:

"If God moves the wills of wicked men by His omnipotent power, causing them to continue in evil and become increasingly hardened, why does He not simply cease from that action?"

The answer is straightforward. To ask such a question is really to wish that God would cease to be God for the sake of the wicked. For when you desire His power and activity to cease, you are in effect asking that

His divine nature should cease. You are asking that He should no longer exercise His sovereignty, no longer govern His creatures, and no longer be the infinitely good God that He is, merely so that the wicked might not become worse.

Others may ask:

"Why does God not change those evil wills which He continually moves and governs?"

This question belongs to those hidden mysteries of the Divine Majesty concerning which the Apostle declares:

"His judgments are past finding out."

(Romans xi. 33)

These are not matters for our investigation but for our reverent worship. If fallen human reason takes offence at this and begins to complain, let it complain. Its objections will accomplish nothing. God remains unchanged, and His truth remains the same.

If many wicked men are offended and turn away because of these things, let them do so. The elect of God will nevertheless remain. God's purposes do not depend upon the approval of men.

The same answer must be given to those who ask:

"Why did God permit Adam to fall?"

Or:

"Why did He allow all mankind to become infected by Adam's sin?"

Could He not have preserved Adam from falling? Could He not have created us from some other source? Could He not have purified human nature before bringing us into existence?

Such questions arise continually, yet they all lead back to the same truth.

God is that supreme Being for whose will no cause can be assigned. No reason exists above His will to govern it or judge it. There is no higher standard to which He must conform. His will is itself the standard and rule of all things.

If God's will were governed by some law, reason, or cause outside itself, then it would no longer be the will of God. It would be subject to something greater than itself.

Therefore, God's will is not right because He is obligated to will in a particular way. Rather, whatever God wills is right because He wills it.

Human wills may be judged according to causes, reasons, motives, and standards. The creature's will is accountable because it is subject to

a higher authority. But no such cause can be assigned to the will of the Creator.

To demand a reason above God's will is to place another authority above God Himself. It is, in effect, to invent another creator who governs the Creator.

Therefore, when we reach the limits of what God has revealed, faith bows in worship. We may know that God's will is always righteous, wise, and good, even when the reasons for His actions remain hidden from us. Beyond that point, we must not strive to penetrate the secret counsels of God, but humbly adore the Majesty whose judgments are unsearchable and whose ways are past finding out.

Section LXXXIX

The Failure Of The Diatribe's Interpretation

I trust that these arguments have sufficiently refuted both the Diatribe and its invented interpretation. Let us now turn to the text itself and see whether this explanation bears any resemblance to what Moses actually says.

Those who evade the force of Scripture by means of clever interpretations generally treat the text itself with contempt. Their only concern is to seize upon a single word or phrase, tear it from its context, and force it to serve their own opinions. They pay no attention to the surrounding circumstances, the argument that precedes it, the consequences that follow it, or the intention of the author.

This is precisely what the Diatribe does here. Ignoring the purpose of Moses and the plain meaning of his words, it seizes upon the phrase:

"I will harden."

Having isolated these words from their context, it then makes them mean whatever it pleases. It never stops to consider whether its interpretation can be fitted back into the passage as a whole or made consistent with the overall argument of the text.

This is the very reason why Scripture appeared obscure to so many of the learned men who have approached it in this way. And little wonder! Even the sun itself would cease to give light if it were subjected to such treatment.

But let us pass over what has already been proved from Scripture—that Pharaoh cannot rightly be said to have been hardened merely

because God bore with him patiently and did not immediately punish him. After all, Pharaoh was repeatedly punished through the many plagues sent upon Egypt.

Even if we were to accept the Diatribe's explanation, namely, that hardening simply means God's patience in withholding immediate punishment, the interpretation still fails.

For why would God repeatedly declare beforehand that He would harden Pharaoh's heart when the signs and wonders were performed? Before any of those signs occurred, Pharaoh was already prosperous, powerful, wealthy, and enjoying the benefits of God's patience. He was already being spared immediate judgment. During that very period of divine forbearance, he cruelly oppressed the children of Israel and multiplied his wickedness against them.

If the Diatribe's interpretation were correct, Pharaoh would already have been hardened long before Moses appeared.

You can therefore see that this explanation has no relevance to the passage under discussion. It merely describes a general condition common to all sinners. Every person who sins does so while being sustained and spared by God's patience. If hardening means nothing more than being tolerated by divine long-suffering, then every sinner would be hardened in exactly the same sense.

Indeed, we would be forced to conclude that all men are hardened, since there is no one who does not sin, and no one who sins except while being borne with by the patience of God.

Therefore, the hardening of Pharaoh spoken of in this passage must be something more specific than that general hardening which results from God's long-suffering toward sinners. Moses is describing a particular act of divine hardening, distinct from the ordinary patience that God shows toward all mankind.

Section XC

Moses' immediate purpose in this passage is not primarily to explain the hardening of Pharaoh, but to declare the truthfulness and mercy of God. God had promised the children of Israel that He would deliver them from Egypt (Exodus 6:1), and Moses' concern was that they should not lose confidence in that promise.

Because their deliverance would involve great difficulties, God

revealed those difficulties beforehand. He did this so that when the events unfolded exactly as He had foretold, their faith would not fail. Everything would happen according to the order and plan which God Himself had determined.

It is as though God were saying:

"I will certainly deliver you, but you will find it difficult to believe because Pharaoh will stubbornly resist and delay your release. Yet do not lose heart. His resistance will only serve My purpose. Through it I will perform greater signs and wonders, strengthen your faith, and display My power more clearly. In this way you will learn to trust Me more firmly in every future trial."

Christ acted in much the same way with His disciples. At the Last Supper He promised them a kingdom, yet at the same time warned them of the many troubles that lay ahead, including His own death and their future sufferings. By foretelling these things, He prepared them so that when they came to pass, their faith would be strengthened rather than shaken.

Moses makes this purpose plain when he records God's words:

"Pharaoh shall not let you go, that My wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt."

Again, God says:

"For this cause have I raised thee up, for to shew in thee My power; and that My name may be declared throughout all the earth" (Exodus 9:16; Romans 9:17).

From this it is clear that Pharaoh was hardened so that he would resist God and delay Israel's deliverance. His resistance provided the occasion for God's mighty works to be displayed. Through those signs, God's power, glory, and faithfulness would be made known throughout the earth.

The purpose of all this was to strengthen faith and encourage those who were weak and fearful, so that they might confidently believe that God is true, faithful, powerful, and merciful.

It is as if God were speaking tenderly to His people as a father speaks to his children:

"Do not be afraid of Pharaoh's hardness of heart. I Myself control it. The very thing that troubles you is in My hand. I will use it to perform many signs and wonders, and through them I will reveal My majesty and strengthen your faith."

This also explains why Moses repeatedly records after each plague:

"And Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as the Lord had said" (Exodus 7:13, 22; 8:15, 32; 9:12, and elsewhere).

Why does Moses continually add the words, "as the Lord had said"?

The purpose is to show that God proved Himself true. What He had foretold came to pass exactly as He had declared.

Now, if Pharaoh's will had possessed true freedom and the ability to turn either way, God could not have predicted his hardening with such certainty. But God cannot be deceived and cannot lie. Therefore Pharaoh's hardening came to pass necessarily and exactly as God had foretold.

This could only be the case if Pharaoh's hardening ultimately rested, not in the power of man, but in the power of God. As I have already shown, God knew with certainty that He would continue the operation of His omnipotence in Pharaoh and could not cease to be God on Pharaoh's account.

God also knew that Pharaoh's will, being naturally corrupt and hostile to God, could not embrace a message that opposed its own desires. Therefore, while God continued to sustain Pharaoh's will by His omnipotent power, and while the word of God was continually set before him through Moses, only one outcome was possible: offence, resistance, and increasing hardness of heart.

Had God withdrawn His sustaining power and left Pharaoh's will entirely to itself, there might perhaps have been room to discuss which way it could turn. But that was not the case. Pharaoh's will continued to act according to its own nature. No violence was done to it. It was not forced against its desires. Rather, under God's sovereign government, it willingly pursued the evil course that belonged to its corrupt nature.

Because Pharaoh's will was evil, it could only oppose the word of God. Thus, the more clearly God's word was presented to him, the harder his heart became.

This passage therefore stands as a powerful testimony against Free Will. God, who cannot lie, declared beforehand that Pharaoh would be hardened. Since God's word cannot fail, Pharaoh could not ultimately do otherwise.

Let us now turn to Paul, who takes up this very passage concerning Pharaoh in Romans chapter nine.

How miserably the Diatribe struggles when confronted with this portion of Scripture! Fearing that it may lose its grip on Free-will, it continually changes its form and adopts one explanation after another.

At one moment it argues that there is a necessity of consequence but not a necessity of the thing itself. At another, it distinguishes between an ordinary will, or a will of sign, which may be resisted, and a secret will of decree, which cannot be resisted. Elsewhere it claims that Paul's words are not discussing man's salvation at all. In one place it admits that God's foreknowledge imposes necessity; in another it denies that necessity altogether.

Again, it teaches that grace first prepares the will so that it may choose, and then accompanies it as it proceeds toward a favourable outcome. In one place it maintains that the First Cause accomplishes everything directly; in another it says that God acts only through secondary causes while remaining inactive Himself.

By such verbal manoeuvres and endless distinctions, the Diatribe accomplishes nothing except to waste time and obscure the real issue. Instead of addressing the matter under discussion, it continually diverts attention elsewhere.

It seems to imagine that we are so dull and indifferent that we care no more about the truth than it does itself.

It behaves like children who, fearing punishment or amusing themselves in play, cover their eyes with their hands and imagine that because they cannot see others, no one can see them. So the Diatribe, unable to endure the brightness—indeed, the very lightning-flash—of these clear Scriptures, pretends not to see what stands plainly before it. And because it closes its own eyes, it wishes to persuade us that ours are closed as well.

Yet all these evasions merely reveal a conscience struggling against a truth it cannot overcome.

As for that old invention concerning a "necessity of consequence" but not a "necessity of the thing consequent," it has already been sufficiently answered.

Let Erasmus invent as many distinctions as he pleases. Let him cavil

and object without end. The fact remains unchanged:

If God foreknew that Judas would become a traitor, then Judas necessarily became a traitor.

Neither Judas nor any other creature possessed the power to alter what God had infallibly foreknown.

This does not mean that Judas acted under external compulsion. He acted willingly. His betrayal was his own deed and arose from his own will. Yet that willing itself was moved into action by God through His omnipotent government, just as He governs all things.

God neither lies nor is deceived.

This truth is plain, certain, and unassailable.

No obscurity exists here, no ambiguity of language, no room for doubt, even though the wisest men of every age should persuade themselves otherwise.

No matter how much men may resist it, every awakened conscience is compelled to confess this truth:

IF GOD CANNOT BE DECEIVED IN WHAT HE FOREKNOWS, THEN WHAT HE FOREKNOWS MUST NECESSARILY COME TO PASS.

If this were not so, who could trust His promises?

Who would fear His warnings?

How could God promise or threaten anything if the fulfilment of His words could be frustrated by human uncertainty or prevented by the changing will of man?

This clear and undeniable truth silences every objection, settles every dispute, and secures a complete victory over all evasive subtleties.

We readily acknowledge that human foreknowledge is uncertain and fallible.

An eclipse do

es not occur because a man foresees it. Rather, he foresees it because it is going to occur.

But what has human foreknowledge to do with the present discussion?

We are not speaking of the foreknowledge of man but of the foreknowledge of God.

If you deny that God's foreknowledge renders the event certain, then you overthrow faith itself. You destroy the force of God's promises and threatenings. You remove all grounds for fearing God or trusting Him. Indeed, you undermine the very concept of divinity itself.

Yet even the Diatribe, after resisting for so long and attempting every possible escape, finally finds itself pressed by the force of truth and begins, however reluctantly, to concede the very point for which we contend. At last it admits:

Section XCII

The Diatribe's Unintended Confession

After many attempts to escape the force of these arguments, the Diatribe finally makes a remarkable admission.

It says:

"The question concerning the will and predestination of God is somewhat difficult. For God wills those same things which He foreknows. And this is the substance of what Paul subjoins, 'Who hath resisted His will?' If He have mercy on whom He will and harden whom He will. For if there were a king who could accomplish whatever he pleased and no one could resist him, he would be said to do whatever he willed. So the will of God, as the principal cause of all things that take place, seems to impose a necessity upon our will."

At last the truth has been spoken.

For this statement concedes the very point under dispute.

If God's will is the principal cause of all things, and if no one can resist it, where then is Free Will?

Yet no sooner has the Diatribe spoken truly than it immediately retreats.

It responds:

"But Paul does not explain this point. He merely rebukes the objector, saying, 'Who art thou, O man, that repliest against God?'"

What an astonishing claim!

Paul does not explain the matter?

What then is the purpose of the entire chapter?

Is not the rebuke itself part of the explanation?

What question is being discussed?

Is it not whether God's will determines all things?

Paul states:

"He hath mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth." (Romans 9:18)

Again:

"So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy." (Romans 9:16)

Could words be plainer?

Nor does Paul stop there.

He immediately anticipates the objection that naturally arises from such teaching:

"Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?" (Romans 9:19)

Observe carefully what this objection assumes.

It assumes precisely what Paul has been teaching—that God's will is irresistible.

The objector does not complain that God's will might be resisted.

He complains because it cannot be resisted.

He argues:

"If God's will determines all things, why does He still hold us accountable?"

That is exactly the issue.

And Paul does not deny the premise.

He does not reply:

"You misunderstand; God's will may be resisted."

He does not attempt to defend Free Will.

Instead, he silences the objector:

"Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?" (Romans 9:20)

Thus Paul confirms what the objector understood.

God's will is irresistible.

God has mercy on whom He wills.

God hardens whom He wills.

And man is not in a position to summon God before his tribunal and demand an explanation.

Had Paul not been teaching this very doctrine, the objection would never have arisen.

No one would have complained about God's justice if human freedom remained untouched.

The complaint itself proves the point.

The objector sees clearly that God's will determines all things and therefore asks:

"Why doth he yet find fault?"

Paul's answer is not to deny God's sovereignty but to affirm it.

He commands the objector to be silent before the majesty of God.

The apostle therefore teaches that God's will is accomplished with certainty, that man possesses no independent power by which he may resist that will, and that all things ultimately depend upon God's purpose.

This is why he directs us not to speculation but to reverence.

The divine will rules over us.

We do not rule over it.

God owes nothing to His creatures.

He never received anything from us.

He is indebted to no one.

Whatever He gives, He gives freely.

Whatever He withholds, He withholds justly.

And therefore, when reason rebels against God's sovereignty, Paul does not defend human liberty.

He calls upon man to bow before the majesty of God and to acknowledge that the Creator has full authority over His creation.

Section XCIII

God's Prescience And Omnipotence Destroy Free Will

This is not the place, nor is it the time, to be prying into those hidden caverns of mystery. Rather, it is the place to adore the true Majesty of God in His fearful, wonderful, and incomprehensible judgments, and to pray:

"Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10)

Yet there is nowhere that human beings show themselves more irreverent and reckless than when they attempt to investigate these secret mysteries and judgments of God.

While claiming great reverence for Scripture, men often neglect those things which God has commanded us to search, and instead busy themselves with those hidden matters which He has not revealed.

Indeed, they pursue such inquiries with relentless boldness, if not outright blasphemy.

For is it not reckless presumption when we attempt to reconcile God's absolute foreknowledge with our supposed freedom, and are willing to diminish God's foreknowledge rather than surrender our cherished idea of human liberty?

Is it not presumption when we hear that God's will determines all things and immediately begin to complain:

"Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?" (Romans 9:19)

Then human reason begins to cry out:

Where is the God who is most merciful?

Where is He who wills not the death of a sinner?

Has He created men merely to delight in their misery?

Such objections, and countless others like them, are the very complaints that shall be uttered by the damned throughout eternity.

Yet even natural reason is compelled to acknowledge that the living and true God must be a God who, by His own sovereign liberty, determines all things.

For what kind of God would He be if He did not certainly know the future?

He would be no God at all, but merely an idol.

Even the pagans attributed an inevitable destiny to their gods.

Likewise, what kind of God would He be if He could not accomplish all that He wills?

Or if anything could occur independently of Him?

Therefore, once God's foreknowledge and omnipotence are granted, the conclusion follows irresistibly.

We did not create ourselves.

We do not sustain ourselves.

We do not act independently of ourselves.

Rather, we exist, live, and act by the power of God.

And if God foreknew from eternity what we would be, if He created us as we are, and if He continually governs and directs us according to His purpose, how can it be imagined that we possess a freedom by which we may act contrary to what He foreknew and now brings to pass?

Thus God's foreknowledge and man's supposed Free Will stand in direct opposition to one another.

One of two things must be true.

Either God is mistaken in His foreknowledge and fails in His government—which is impossible—or we act and are acted upon in accordance with His foreknowledge and His operation.

By the omnipotence of God I do not mean merely a power by which He is able to do many things that He chooses not to do.

I mean that active and effective power by which He actually works all things in all things.

This is the sense in which Scripture calls Him Almighty.

And it is this omnipotence, together with His infallible foreknowledge, that utterly destroys the doctrine of Free Will.

No appeal can be made here to obscurity in Scripture.

No refuge can be found in claims that the matter is too difficult.

The words are perfectly plain.

The truth is evident.

Even a schoolboy can understand the argument.

Therefore, no matter how many ages have passed, no matter how many learned men have written or taught otherwise, their authority cannot overthrow the clear testimony of Scripture.

God foreknows all things.

God governs all things.

God works all things according to His will.

Therefore man's imagined Free Will cannot stand.

Section XCIV

Why This Doctrine Offends Human Reason

But it is precisely at this point that human reason takes the greatest offence.

For it seems contrary to all natural understanding that God, who is described as overflowing with mercy and goodness, should, by His own will, leave some men in their hardness, harden them further, and finally condemn them. To many it appears as though God delights in sin and takes pleasure in the eternal misery of those who perish.

Such thoughts seem unjust, cruel, and intolerable to human reason.

This has been the stumbling-block for many great and learned men throughout the ages.

And indeed, who would not be offended by it?

I myself was once deeply troubled by these things.

More than once I was driven to the very brink of despair.

Indeed, before I came to understand the value of such despair, I was so distressed that I could almost have wished I had never been born.

Yet afterwards I learned how near such despair lies to grace, and how profitable it can be when God uses it to humble the sinner.

It is because of this offence that men have laboured so tirelessly to defend God's goodness and preserve man's freedom.

Here is where all the distinctions and explanations have arisen.

Men have distinguished between God's revealed will and His secret will.

They have distinguished between a necessity of consequence and a necessity of the thing itself.

And they have invented countless other subtleties of the same kind.

Yet all these devices have achieved little more than the deception of the simple through empty words and what Paul calls:

"Science falsely so called." (1 Timothy 6:20)

For despite all these explanations, a deep conviction remains in the hearts of men whenever they seriously consider these matters.

Both the learned and the unlearned find themselves compelled to acknowledge that necessity follows from the foreknowledge and omnipotence of God.

Even human reason itself, though it rebels against this conclusion and seeks every possible way to escape it, is ultimately forced to admit it.

Indeed, it would be compelled to do so even if Scripture had never spoken on the matter.

For these truths are written upon the hearts of men.

Whenever they are plainly stated, men recognise them.

They may dislike them.

They may resist them.

Yet inwardly they know them to be true.

First, all men acknowledge that God is almighty—not merely in potential power, but in actual operation.

If He were not, He would cease to be God.

Second, all men acknowledge that God knows and foreknows all things.

He cannot be mistaken.

He cannot be deceived.

Once these two truths are granted, the conclusion follows inevitably.

We did not create ourselves.

We do not direct our own existence independently.

Nor do we act according to some autonomous freedom of our own.

Rather, we live and act according to the counsel, foreknowledge, and power of God.

Since God foreknew us before we existed, created us as we are, and continues to govern all things according to His immutable purpose, it follows that our actions occur according to that purpose.

Thus, when the matter is honestly considered, the doctrine of Free Will is found to have no real foundation.

The conviction that man's will is not absolutely free is written in the hearts of all men.

It has merely been obscured by endless debates, by philosophical speculations, and by the authority of many teachers who have spoken otherwise throughout the centuries.

The situation is much the same as with every other law of God written upon the heart.

As Paul teaches, God's law is known inwardly by men.

When it is clearly presented, conscience acknowledges it.

When it is obscured by false teaching and confused by human opinions, that knowledge becomes clouded.

Yet the truth itself remains.

And so it is here.

However much men dispute against it, the combined testimony of God's omnipotence, God's foreknowledge, Scripture, conscience, and reason itself continually points to the same conclusion:

Free Will, in the sense imagined by men, does not exist.

All things ultimately stand under the sovereign government of God.

Section XCV

Paul's Argument And The Potter's Clay

I now return to Paul's argument.

For if Paul, in Romans chapter 9, does not explain this matter, and does not plainly teach our necessity under the foreknowledge and will of God, then why does he introduce the illustration of the potter and the clay?

Why does he say that the potter has power over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour? (Romans 9:21)

Why does he ask:

"Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?" (Romans 9:20)

Paul is speaking about men.

The clay represents men.

The potter represents God.

If man possesses genuine freedom to determine his own destiny, then this illustration is entirely unnecessary.

Indeed, it would be absurd.

For what purpose does the comparison serve if Paul is not teaching that man stands before God as clay before the potter?

Furthermore, the whole argument of Romans is directed toward proving that salvation is entirely of grace and not of human ability.

Paul's purpose throughout the epistle is to show that man can accomplish nothing by his own power, even when he appears outwardly to be doing well.

Thus he says:

"But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness." (Romans 9:31)

And again:

"The Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness." (Romans 9:30)

These matters will be examined more fully later.

For the moment it is enough to observe that the entire argument of Romans stands against the notion of Free Will.

Yet the Diatribe continually ignores the substance of Paul's reasoning.

Instead of dealing with the argument as a whole, it seizes upon isolated expressions, tears them from their context, and then argues from fragments while leaving the main body untouched.

Even Paul's exhortations in Romans chapter 11 provide no support for the Diatribe.

When Paul says:

"Thou standest by faith. Be not high-minded, but fear." (Romans 11:20)

and:

"And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in." (Romans 11:23)

he is not speaking of man's natural ability.

He is using exhortations and conditions, the purpose of which has already been explained.

Indeed, when speaking of the Jews, Paul does not say that they possess

the power to believe whenever they choose.

Rather he says:

"God is able to graft them in again." (Romans 11:23)

The emphasis remains upon God's power, not man's.

To speak plainly, the Diatribe handles these passages with visible uncertainty.

Again and again it approaches a decisive point only to withdraw.

Whenever proof is required, it suddenly changes direction.

One constantly encounters statements such as:

"But enough of this."

"This is not my present purpose."

"I shall not pursue the matter further."

Or similar evasions.

The argument is repeatedly abandoned at the very point where it ought to be established.

Thus the reader is left uncertain whether the author truly intends to defend Free Will or merely to evade Paul's meaning through verbal subtleties.

Such hesitation reveals a lack of conviction.

As for myself, I cannot proceed in such a manner.

I cannot write with uncertainty where certainty is required.

I must speak plainly.

I must affirm what I believe to be true.

And I must support it with clear and sufficient proof.

Section XCVI

The Necessity Of Immutability

The Diatribe next attempts to reconcile necessity and freedom by saying:

"Not every kind of necessity destroys Free Will. God the Father necessarily begets the Son, and yet He does so willingly and freely, not by compulsion."

But this entirely misses the point.

I am not arguing about compulsion.

I have repeatedly stated that the issue is not whether a person acts willingly or unwillingly.

The issue is whether what occurs has been immutably determined

by God.

I readily acknowledge that the Father willingly begets the Son.

I readily acknowledge that Judas willingly betrayed Christ.

But I maintain that Judas's willing betrayal was infallibly foreknown and immutably determined by God.

If this distinction is not understood, then let it be stated more clearly.

There are two kinds of necessity.

The first is a necessity of force.

This is when someone is compelled against his will.

The second is a necessity of immutability.

This is when something must occur because it has been certainly foreknown and determined by God.

It is this second necessity that I am discussing.

The question is not whether Judas acted willingly.

The question is whether it was infallibly determined that Judas would will to betray Christ at the appointed time.

The Diatribe itself admits:

"With respect to the immutable foreknowledge of God, Judas necessarily became a traitor; nevertheless, Judas had power to change his own will."

But what does this mean?

If God's foreknowledge is truly immutable, how could Judas change his will?

Could he alter God's foreknowledge?

Could he make God's knowledge uncertain?

Could he render God's certainty false?

The very suggestion destroys itself.

At this point the Diatribe retreats from the argument.

Instead of answering, it hands the matter over to the schools and their distinctions concerning the necessity of consequence and the necessity of the thing consequent.

Then it declares that it does not wish to become involved in such difficult questions.

A convenient retreat indeed!

The battle is brought into the open.

The decisive issue is before us.

And at the very moment an answer is required, the defender of Free Will withdraws and leaves others to explain the matter.

Such caution might be tolerated in ordinary subjects.

But not in theology.

Not where the salvation of souls is concerned.

This question is not a minor technicality.

It is the very heart of the dispute.

Everything turns upon it.

Either Free Will stands or it falls.

Either God's foreknowledge is certain or it is not.

There is no middle ground.

Therefore it is not enough to dismiss the matter as a subtle question for the schools.

Conscience will not be satisfied by such evasions.

No amount of rhetoric can silence the force of the truth.

This is the hinge upon which the entire controversy turns.

And it is precisely here that Free Will finds itself unable to stand.

For if God's foreknowledge is infallible, then what He foreknows must certainly occur.

And if what He foreknows must certainly occur, then the freedom claimed by the defenders of Free Will cannot exist in the sense they maintain.

Therefore the issue must be faced directly and honestly.

It cannot be avoided by clever distinctions, rhetorical flourishes, or strategic withdrawals.

The truth must either be acknowledged or denied.

And if it is acknowledged, Free Will falls.

Section XCVII

The Necessity Of The Consequence

The Schoolmen themselves felt the overwhelming force of this argument.

Unable to escape it, they invented their distinction between the necessity of the consequence and the necessity of the thing consequent.

But this distinction accomplishes very little.

Indeed, as I have already shown, it ultimately works against those who employ it.

For they fail to consider the implications of what they are admitting.

Once you grant the necessity of the consequence, Free Will has already fallen.

Whether the thing itself is said to be necessary or contingent afterwards makes no practical difference.

The matter is already decided.

For what does it profit me to hear that a man acts willingly and is not compelled?

That is not the question.

The point at issue is this:

If God foreknew what a man would do, must that action occur or not?

If it must occur, then the freedom claimed by the defenders of Free Will has vanished.

Suppose God foreknew that Judas would betray Christ.

Or suppose He foreknew that Judas would change his mind and not betray Him.

Whichever of these God foreknew must necessarily come to pass.

Otherwise God's foreknowledge would be mistaken.

And that is impossible.

This is what is meant by the necessity of the consequence.

If God foreknows something, that thing must occur.

There is no uncertainty.

There is no possibility of failure.

And therefore the doctrine of an independent Free Will cannot stand.

This necessity is neither obscure nor difficult.

It is plain to every honest mind.

Even if all the learned men in the world denied it, the truth would remain unchanged.

The matter is so evident that it can almost be touched.

Yet having granted this necessity, the defenders of Free Will immediately attempt to comfort themselves by appealing to what they call the necessity of the thing consequent.

They argue:

"Although God foreknew that Judas would betray Christ, Judas still possessed the ability not to betray Him."

But how can these two statements be reconciled?

On the one hand they say:

"Judas could have chosen otherwise."

On the other hand they admit:

"Judas must necessarily do what God foreknew."

How can both statements be true?

Do they not directly contradict one another?

The answer commonly given is:

"But Judas was not forced to betray Christ against his will."

Yet this entirely misses the point.

The question is not whether Judas acted willingly.

The question is whether the event itself could have occurred differently.

The defenders of Free Will shift the discussion from one kind of necessity to another.

We are discussing certainty.

They answer by discussing compulsion.

We ask whether the event could fail to occur.

They reply that Judas was not dragged unwillingly into his action.

But no one has denied that Judas acted willingly.

The issue is whether that willing itself could have been otherwise.

Thus one question is asked and another is answered.

The entire distinction collapses because it fails to address the matter under discussion.

The truth remains unchanged.

If God foreknew the betrayal, then the betrayal must occur.

If the betrayal must occur, then Judas could not ultimately act contrary to what God foreknew.

To deny this is to deny the certainty of God's knowledge.

Therefore all these distinctions amount to little more than empty words.

They neither solve the difficulty nor preserve Free Will.

They merely create confusion.

Enough has now been said concerning this first part of the discussion, which has dealt with Pharaoh and the hardening of his heart.

In that discussion we have considered arguments that involve not merely a single passage, but the whole testimony of Scripture and the strongest proofs that can be brought forward against Free Will.

We now proceed to the remaining part of Paul's argument concerning Jacob and Esau, of whom it is written that God's purpose stood concerning them before they were born.

"Neither having done any good or evil." (Romans 9:11)

The Misuse Of Jerome And The Evasion Of The Diatribe

The Diatribe attempts to escape the force of this passage by saying that it does not properly concern man's salvation.

According to its argument, God may determine that one man shall be a servant and another a ruler, or that one shall be poor and another rich, without any reference to eternal salvation.

Observe, however, how many evasions a mind will invent when it wishes to flee from the truth and yet cannot escape it.

Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that the passage concerns only temporal matters. What then?

Was Paul discussing it for no purpose?

Was the apostle introducing it merely as an ornament?

Must we conclude that in the midst of one of the most serious doctrinal discussions in Scripture, Paul suddenly abandons his argument and begins speaking irrelevantly?

Such a conclusion is absurd.

Yet this is precisely where the reasoning of the Diatribe leads.

Behind it stands the influence of Jerome, who on more than one occasion boldly asserted that passages which have little force in their original setting are made powerful by Paul when he cites them.

But what does such a statement really imply?

It suggests that Paul handled Scripture carelessly.

It implies that he employed passages in ways never intended by the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, it amounts to accusing the apostle of building Christian doctrine upon meanings foreign to the original text.

Such a charge is intolerable.

For if Paul does this, then the foundations of Christian doctrine are uncertain.

If Paul may freely impose meanings upon Scripture, who can trust his arguments?

Who can be certain that divine truth is being taught rather than human invention?

This is no honour to the Holy Spirit who inspired Paul.

Rather, it is an insult to both.

Jerome's statement should therefore be rejected wherever it appears.

Like many of his comments upon Scripture, it reveals more confidence than understanding.

Yet the Diatribe receives it without examination and treats it as though it were an unquestionable authority.

Thus human opinions are elevated above the Scriptures themselves.

And then men wonder why Scripture appears obscure.

They wonder why so many teachers have become confused.

The reason is simple.

Human interpretations have been allowed to rule where God's Word alone ought to govern.

Section XCIX

Paul's Argument From Jacob And Esau

Let it therefore be rejected as a false principle that passages which are weak in their original setting become strong only when Paul employs them.

Such an assertion is made, but never proved.

And it is usually made by those who understand neither Paul nor the passages he cites.

Even if we were to grant that the prophecy concerning Jacob and Esau refers primarily to temporal matters—which is not, in fact, its full meaning—Paul still uses it legitimately and powerfully.

His argument remains unshaken.

For Paul is not merely discussing national privileges or earthly positions.

He is proving that God's purpose stands independently of human merit.

He writes:

"For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand." (Romans 9:11)

This is the heart of his argument.

Before either child was born,

before either had acted,

before either had earned anything,

God declared:

"The elder shall serve the younger." (Romans 9:12)

Paul's point is clear.

Jacob did not obtain his position because of merit.

Esau did not lose his position because of merit.

The distinction rested solely upon God's purpose and calling.

This is the central issue.

And it is precisely the issue that the Diatribe avoids.

Rather than confronting Paul's argument concerning merit, election, and divine calling, it diverts the discussion to the subject of temporal servitude.

But that entirely misses the point.

Paul is not asking whether Esau's servitude pertained directly to salvation.

He is asking upon what basis the distinction was made.

What had Jacob done to deserve preference?

What had Esau done to deserve rejection?

The answer is obvious.

Neither had done anything.

Neither good nor evil.

Yet God had already determined what would become of each.

The decree preceded the works.

Indeed, the decree preceded their birth.

Therefore the distinction cannot possibly rest upon human merit or Free Will.

This is the point Paul presses.

This is the argument that ought to be answered.

What contribution did Free Will make to Jacob's election?

What power did it possess to alter Esau's condition?

Before either child existed, God's purpose concerning them had already been declared.

One would rule.

The other would serve.

The outcome was determined before either had acted.

The reward was assigned before the workman had entered the field.

This is the issue before us.

And it is this issue that the Diatribe continually evades.

Instead of addressing the force of Paul's argument, it seeks refuge in distinctions and diversions that leave the apostle's reasoning untouched.

But the conclusion remains.

If God's purpose concerning Jacob and Esau was established before either had done good or evil, then the determining cause cannot be found in human merit, human choice, or Free Will.

It rests in the sovereign purpose of God alone.

Section C

Jacob And Esau: God's Purpose Before Their Birth

However, Moses does not speak merely of outward servitude, nor is Paul mistaken in applying this passage to the greater matter of God's saving purpose. Although this point extends beyond our present argument, I will not allow the apostle to be slandered by irreverent critics.

The oracle given to Rebekah reads:

"Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger." (Genesis 25:23)

Here two distinct peoples are clearly set before us.

The younger was chosen to receive the favour of God, so that he might prevail over the elder—not by his own strength, but through the help and blessing of God. For how could the younger overcome the elder unless God Himself were with him?

Since the younger was appointed to be the people of God, the prophecy cannot be limited merely to outward authority or earthly dominion. It includes everything connected with the covenant of grace: the blessing of God, His Word, His Spirit, the promise of Christ, and the everlasting kingdom.

Scripture confirms this throughout the later history of Jacob, where he is shown receiving the blessing, inheriting the promises, and becoming the heir of God's covenant.

Paul therefore briefly sums up what Moses records more fully when he writes:

"The elder shall serve the younger."

He simply directs us back to Moses, where the matter is explained in greater detail.

Thus, in answer to the irreverent claims of Jerome and the Diatribe, it may truly be said that these passages have even greater force in their

original setting than in Paul's epistle.

The same principle applies throughout the writings of the apostles. They do not misuse Scripture. Rather, they cite passages which already establish the truths they are teaching.

For what would be more absurd than to support an argument with evidence that proves nothing?

Even philosophers would be ridiculed if they attempted to establish a truth by citing something less certain, or entirely unrelated to the point in question.

How much less, then, should such folly be attributed to the apostles of Christ, who were entrusted with proclaiming those doctrines upon which the salvation of souls depends?

Such accusations arise only from those who have no serious regard for the authority of Holy Scripture.

Section CI

"Jacob Have I Loved, But Esau Have I Hated"

The Diatribe next turns to the words of Malachi:

"Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." (Malachi 1:2–3)

And here it attempts to escape the force of the passage in several ways.

First, it argues:

"If we take the words literally, God does not love as we love, nor does He hate as we hate; for such passions do not belong to God."

But what kind of argument is this?

The question before us is not whether God loves and hates in the same manner as men. The question is why He loves one and not another.

We readily acknowledge that God's love and hatred differ entirely from ours.

Human love changes.

Human hatred changes.

But God's love and hatred are eternal, unchanging, and immutable.

He is not subject to passions or fluctuations as men are.

Yet this truth strengthens our argument rather than weakens it.

For if God's love and hatred are eternal and unchangeable, then they existed before any works were performed, before any merit could be earned, and indeed before the world itself was created.

Consequently, God's favour toward Jacob and His rejection of Esau

cannot possibly be grounded in anything found within them.

They must arise solely from His eternal purpose.

Indeed, this very fact demonstrates the complete impotence of Free Will.

God's love did not begin because Jacob first loved Him.

Nor did God's hatred arise because Esau first provoked Him.

The divine determination existed before either had done good or evil.

Thus God's eternal love and hatred stand as further proof that everything unfolds according to His sovereign purpose.

The Diatribe therefore gains nothing by introducing this distinction.

The more it attempts to escape the force of the text, the more clearly it confirms it.

But let us grant, for argument's sake, that God's love means the effect of His love, and God's hatred the effect of His hatred.

Even then, the difficulty remains.

Do these effects occur apart from God's will?

Can they happen independently of His purpose?

Certainly not.

Whatever God wills, He brings to pass.

Therefore the question still stands:

For what merit did God love Jacob before he was born?

For what merit did He hate Esau before he was born?

No answer can be given.

The conclusion is unavoidable.

Paul rightly joins Malachi to Moses.

God loved Jacob before Jacob had done anything worthy of love.

God rejected Esau before Esau had done anything deserving of rejection.

The distinction rested entirely upon God's sovereign choice.

Thus, in the case of Jacob and Esau, the true power of Free Will is plainly revealed—it contributes nothing at all.

Section CII

The second attempt at evasion is this:

The Diatribe argues that Malachi is not speaking of the hatred by which a man is rejected unto eternal judgment, but merely of temporal affliction. It claims that the prophet is simply referring to God's judgments

upon Edom and to those who sought to rebuild it.

But once again this argument treats Paul as though he had misunderstood the Scriptures.

Let us suppose, for a moment, that Malachi is speaking only of temporal judgments. What then?

The argument still fails.

For Paul's point is not merely that affliction came upon Esau, but that it came upon him apart from any merit or demerit of his own. Paul's concern is to show that God's treatment of Jacob and Esau arose from His sovereign purpose, not from anything found in either man.

This is precisely the point that opposes your doctrine of Free Will.

You continually move away from the question of merit and begin speaking about rewards and punishments. Yet in doing so, you never answer the real issue.

What moved God to love Jacob and hate Esau before either had been born?

That is the question.

Moreover, the claim that Malachi speaks only of temporal affliction is itself false. The prophet's meaning is perfectly plain.

Malachi rebukes Israel for its ingratitude. God had loved them, yet they had failed to honour Him as Father and fear Him as Lord.

He proves His love by appealing both to Scripture and to history.

Jacob and Esau were brothers, as Moses records. Yet before they were born, God chose Jacob and rejected Esau.

The proof of this choice was seen throughout their history. Jacob became the covenant people. Esau was driven into desolation. Even when Israel was restored from captivity, Edom remained under judgment. Whenever the Edomites sought to rebuild, God declared that He would overthrow them again.

The prophet's purpose, therefore, is not to condemn the pride of Edom, but to expose the thanklessness of Israel.

Israel ought to have recognised the grace that had distinguished them from their brother nation. Instead, they treated God's favour lightly.

The whole force of the passage rests upon one fact: God loved Jacob and hated Esau.

The distinction did not arise from their works. It arose from God's sovereign choice.

Nor can this be limited to temporal matters alone.

To be received as God's people or rejected from His covenant concerns far more than earthly blessings and judgments. It concerns every aspect of God's favour and kingdom.

God is not merely the God of temporal things. He is the God of all things.

He does not claim only part of a man's life, but the whole man. He is to be worshipped with all the heart, all the soul, all the mind, and all the strength. His covenant extends beyond this world into eternity itself.

Section CIII

The third attempt at evasion is even more confused.

The Diatribe suggests that God neither loves all Gentiles nor hates all Jews, but only certain individuals within each group. It then argues that God hated some before they were born because He foresaw the sins they would later commit, and loved others because He foresaw their future faith.

From this it concludes that God's love and hatred do not conflict with Free Will.

Finally, it appeals to Paul's teaching concerning the olive tree, arguing that the Jews were cut off because of unbelief and the Gentiles grafted in because of faith, while both groups remain capable of changing their condition.

To be candid, it is difficult to determine exactly what the Diatribe intends to say.

Perhaps this confusion is deliberate. When an argument becomes dangerous, ambiguity often becomes a convenient refuge.

For my part, I can find no support whatever for these imagined interpretations.

The text says nothing of the sort.

Nor does the Diatribe provide any proof.

But even if all these interpretations were granted, they would still fail to answer the real question before us.

We are not discussing the fact that believers are grafted in and unbelievers cut off.

That much is clear.

Nor are we discussing the necessity of exhortations to continue in faith.

Paul certainly commands perseverance.

The question is altogether different.

How does a man come to possess faith in the first place?

What merit obtains it?

What work secures it?

What power within man produces it?

That is the question confronting the defender of Free Will.

Paul's answer is plain.

Faith comes not from man's merit, but from God's love.

Unbelief comes not from a lack of opportunity, but from God's righteous judgment.

The distinction lies not in human achievement but in divine mercy.

When faith has been given, believers are exhorted to persevere.

But exhortation does not prove ability.

A command reveals what ought to be done, not what man possesses the power to accomplish.

Therefore Paul's exhortations establish duty, not ability.

And because the Diatribe continually avoids this central issue, I am forced repeatedly to bring it back to the point at hand.

Indeed, to hold it firmly to the actual question is almost to defeat it already.

For its constant tendency is to leave the subject under discussion and retreat to something entirely different.

Section CIV

The next passage considered by the Diatribe is Isaiah 45:9:

"Shall the clay say to him that fashioneth it, What makest thou?"

and Jeremiah 18:6:

"As the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand."

The Diatribe again complains that Paul gives these passages greater force than they possess in their original setting. It argues that the prophets speak only of temporal judgments, whereas Paul applies the imagery to eternal election and reprobation.

Thus once more Paul is accused, indirectly at least, of stretching the meaning of Scripture.

Before examining that claim, however, I would first observe that Paul may not have borrowed this illustration directly from either prophet at

all.

Unlike his usual practice, he does not cite the passage, name the prophet, or indicate that he is quoting Scripture.

It is entirely possible that he employs a common illustration under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, just as other biblical writers use the same image for different purposes.

Paul himself speaks of leaven in one place as representing corrupt conduct and in another as representing corrupt doctrine.

Christ likewise uses leaven to describe different forms of evil.

The image remains the same, while the application varies according to the subject being discussed.

Therefore, even if Isaiah and Jeremiah were speaking chiefly of temporal judgments, Paul is fully justified in applying the image to God's sovereign dealings with men.

But even granting the Diatribe's argument, it still gains nothing.

For temporal afflictions themselves come from God and are imposed upon us independently of our will.

No man chooses his sufferings.

No man can always avoid them.

We endure them because God appoints them.

Indeed, believers are exhorted to bear them patiently precisely because they do not lie within our control.

Thus even in the matter of temporal affliction, the illustration of the potter and the clay continues to testify against the supposed independence of Free Will.

Section CV

The Diatribe next attempts to show that Paul's illustration of the potter and the clay does not overthrow Free Will.

Its first objection is drawn from Scripture itself.

It points to 2 Timothy 2:20–21, where Paul writes:

"In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour."

Paul then adds:

"If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour."

The Diatribe argues as follows:

What could be more absurd than speaking to an earthen vessel and saying, "If you cleanse yourself, you shall become a vessel unto honour"? Such language would be ridiculous if directed toward a lifeless object. Therefore, it must be addressed to a rational creature capable of changing itself and shaping its own destiny according to the will of God.

From this it concludes that Paul's illustration cannot exclude Free Will.

I answer that this argument misunderstands both the passage and the illustration.

First, Paul does not say, "If a man cleanse himself from his own corruption." He says, "If a man purge himself from these"—that is, from the corrupt teachers and false doctrines he has just mentioned.

The meaning is simply that a believer must separate himself from evil influences if he would be useful in the service of God.

But let us grant, for the sake of argument, that the passage means exactly what the Diatribe wishes it to mean. Even then, what has it proved?

How does a statement in 2 Timothy establish the meaning of Paul's argument in Romans 9?

The Diatribe merely places one passage beside another without first demonstrating that both passages are dealing with the same subject.

This is one of the most common errors in handling Scripture—assuming that similar language always carries the same meaning.

The illustration in Romans concerns God's sovereign choice.

The statement in Timothy concerns the believer's conduct.

The two must not be confused.

Yet let us go further.

Suppose both passages are speaking of the same thing. Suppose also that every detail of the illustration does not correspond exactly to the reality represented. That much is obvious. A comparison is never identical in every respect with the thing compared. Otherwise it would not be a comparison at all.

As the old saying goes, a comparison does not walk perfectly on all four legs.

The Diatribe therefore makes a serious mistake. Instead of considering the purpose for which Paul uses the illustration, it fastens itself upon isolated details.

Hilary rightly observed that the meaning of a passage must be

gathered from its overall purpose, not from detached words taken by themselves.

The real question is this: Why does Paul use the illustration?

In 2 Timothy he is comforting believers who have seen many depart from the faith. His consolation is that God's purpose remains secure.

"The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His."

This is the point.

God knows His own.

The illustration of vessels then follows.

Some vessels are for honour and some for dishonour.

The emphasis is not upon the vessels preparing themselves, but upon the master of the house who appoints them to their proper use.

This is entirely consistent with Paul's argument in Romans:

"Hath not the potter power over the clay?"

The whole force of the illustration lies in the authority of the maker, not the independence of the vessel.

Thus Paul's comparison remains fully effective.

It demonstrates that the distinction between vessels arises from the purpose of the master, not from the power of the vessel itself.

The exhortation that follows—"If a man purge himself"—does not alter this.

Commands do not prove ability.

Indeed, if commands proved ability, then Free Will could purify itself without grace; for Paul does not say, "If grace purify a man," but "If a man purge himself."

Yet the Diatribe itself denies such a conclusion.

We have already shown many times that commands reveal duty, not ability.

Therefore the argument collapses.

The illustration remains what Paul intended it to be: a demonstration that the distinction between vessels depends upon God's purpose, not upon man's freedom.

Indeed, if the Diatribe were correct, Paul's whole argument would be destroyed. The vessels would have every reason to accept their condition, since their fate would be determined by their own merit. There would be no cause for complaint, no reason for Paul's imagined objector to protest, and no need for Paul to answer him.

The second objection arises from human reason itself.

The Diatribe argues:

"The blame ought not to be laid upon the vessel but upon the potter. The potter not only shapes the clay but creates it. Yet this vessel is cast into eternal fire despite having done nothing deserving such punishment, except that it lacked the power to do otherwise."

Here the Diatribe reveals more clearly than anywhere else what really troubles it.

For this is nothing less than Paul's own objector speaking again:

"Why doth He yet find fault? For who hath resisted His will?"

This is the great offence of human reason.

It cannot bear the thought that God acts according to His own sovereign will.

It cannot endure the declaration that He has mercy on whom He will have mercy and hardens whom He will.

This truth has offended learned men in every generation.

Reason insists that God must conform to human standards of justice.

It demands that He submit Himself to the judgments of His creatures.

It wishes to summon God before the tribunal of human philosophy and require Him to justify His actions according to the rules of Aristotle and the civil law.

But what arrogance is this!

The creature presumes to judge the Creator.

The clay seeks to instruct the potter.

The work dares to sit in judgment upon the One who made it.

Human reason declares:

"It is unjust for God to condemn those who cannot avoid deserving condemnation."

Therefore, says reason, the doctrine cannot be true.

God must be explained in a way more acceptable to human understanding.

His sovereignty must be restricted.

His freedom must be limited.

His judgments must be adjusted until they agree with our opinions.

But if this principle is accepted, then Paul's whole argument falls to the ground.

The potter would no longer possess authority over the clay.

His decisions would be governed by merit rather than by His own will.

He would no longer make vessels as He pleases but only as human standards require.

And then the objector's complaint would become meaningless.

Why would anyone protest if God merely rewarded merit and punished demerit?

Who would ask:

"Why doth He yet find fault?"

Who would complain that God's will cannot be resisted?

No one.

The complaint only arises because Paul teaches something far stronger.

He teaches that God acts according to His own sovereign purpose.

That is precisely why the objection arises, and precisely why Paul answers it as he does.

The Diatribe's explanation therefore destroys the very argument it claims to explain.

It removes the complaint, but only by removing Paul's doctrine altogether.

The potter's authority remains intact.

God is free to do with His own what He wills.

As the Lord Himself declares:

"Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?"

Therefore all the evasions of the Diatribe fail.

The force of Paul's argument remains untouched, and the sovereignty of God stands exactly where the apostle placed it.

Section CVII

Let us suppose, for a moment, that God ought to deal with men according to their merits when determining who shall be condemned.

If that principle is true, then surely it must also apply to those who are saved.

For if human reason is to be our guide, it would be just as unfair to reward the undeserving as it would be to punish the undeserving.

Therefore, if we follow this reasoning consistently, we must conclude

that God only saves those whose merits deserve salvation. Otherwise, we must accuse Him of injustice for rewarding the wicked and crowning the undeserving.

But if that were the case, what hope would remain for any sinner?

Who among us could possibly be saved?

This reveals the corruption of the human heart.

When God saves the undeserving, justifies the ungodly, and grants mercy where there is no merit, people do not complain. They do not accuse Him of injustice. They gladly accept His grace because it benefits them.

But when God judges the undeserving, pours out His wrath upon those who have no claim upon His mercy, then they protest. Then they complain. Then they accuse God of injustice.

Thus human reason proves itself partial and self-interested.

It does not judge according to justice, but according to advantage.

If it truly loved justice, it would object equally in both cases. It would protest when God rewards the undeserving just as readily as when He punishes the undeserving.

But it does not.

It praises God when His actions appear favourable to itself and condemns Him when they do not.

In reality, it is not seeking God at all. It is seeking its own benefit.

Yet if God is just when He freely saves those who deserve nothing but condemnation, why should He not also be just when He judges those who likewise deserve nothing but mercy?

In both cases He acts according to His own will.

In the one He displays grace and mercy toward the undeserving.

In the other He displays wrath and justice toward the undeserving.

To human reason both actions appear equally difficult to explain. Yet faith bows before them both.

We do not yet understand how God can justly save the undeserving. Nevertheless, we believe it.

Likewise, we do not yet understand how God can justly condemn the undeserving. Yet we believe that also.

The full explanation belongs to that day when we shall see face to face, and the Son of Man shall be revealed in glory.

The Diatribe, however, remains deeply offended by Paul's illustration of the potter and the clay.

Unable to answer it directly, it attempts another strategy.

It gathers together various passages of Scripture—some which appear to emphasise man's responsibility, and others which emphasise God's grace—and then argues that neither side should be understood according to the plain meaning of the words.

According to the Diatribe, all such passages require interpretation.

Otherwise, it says, Paul would contradict himself.

In particular, it points again to Paul's words:

"If a man therefore purge himself from these."

The argument is this:

If this statement is taken literally, Paul appears to place the matter in man's hands. Therefore, some form of interpretation must be introduced.

And if interpretation is permitted here to protect the doctrine of grace, then why should not interpretation also be permitted in the case of the potter and the clay to protect Free Will?

I answer that this argument proves nothing.

Whether a passage is interpreted one way, two ways, or a hundred ways is not the issue.

The question is whether the interpretation establishes the point under discussion.

The Diatribe undertook to prove that Free Will cannot will good, yet still possesses some power of cooperation.

But the passage, "If a man purge himself from these," proves neither one thing nor the other.

It is simply an exhortation.

And if the Diatribe insists that such an exhortation would be meaningless unless man possessed the ability to obey it, then it has abandoned its own position altogether.

For such reasoning would prove not merely a limited Free Will, but a Free Will capable of doing all things without grace.

Thus the Diatribe destroys itself.

We therefore continue to ask for a passage of Scripture that actually proves its interpretation.

Mere assertions do not satisfy us.

We do not accept interpretations invented by human imagination and unsupported by the Word of God.

Nor do we admit that Paul contradicts himself.

The supposed contradiction exists only in the imagination of the Diatribe.

Indeed, if we were permitted to alter Scripture by adding our own conclusions to every command—saying, for example, that whatever God commands must therefore be within man's natural ability—then not only Paul, but the whole of Scripture would teach that Free Will can accomplish everything.

Yet that is precisely what the Diatribe itself denies.

For it has already defined Free Will as unable to will anything good.

Therefore, before attacking us, it must first explain how these two assertions can be reconciled:

"Free Will cannot will any good thing."

And,

"If a man purge himself from these."

If the latter proves natural ability, then the former must be abandoned.

Thus the Diatribe finds itself trapped by its own arguments.

Unable to overcome Paul's illustration of the potter, it seeks only to evade it.

In doing so, it not only contradicts Scripture but also refutes itself.

The more it struggles to escape Paul's argument, the more clearly it demonstrates the weakness of its own position.

Section CIX

As for myself, I have never advocated the kind of artificial interpretations invented by the Diatribe.

I have never said things such as:

"Stretch forth thy hand" means "Grace shall stretch it forth for you."

Those are inventions of the Diatribe, not mine.

My position has always been much simpler.

There is no contradiction in Scripture, and therefore no need for imaginative explanations designed to remove contradictions that do not exist.

The supporters of Free Will create these difficulties for themselves. They stumble over plain ground and imagine conflicts where there are

none.

Take, for example, these two passages:

"If a man purge himself from these."

And:

"God worketh all in all."

There is no contradiction between them.

The first passage is conditional. It neither affirms nor denies man's ability. It simply describes what ought to be found in a man.

The language is perfectly plain.

The meaning is perfectly clear.

Only when the Diatribe adds its own conclusions does confusion arise.

It hears a command and immediately assumes an ability.

It hears a condition and immediately concludes that man possesses the power to fulfil it.

Thus it reasons:

A thing is commanded.

Therefore man can do it.

Otherwise the command would be meaningless.

But this conclusion is not found in Scripture. It exists only in the imagination of the interpreter.

The second passage, "God worketh all in all," is entirely different.

It is not conditional but declarative.

It states plainly that every power and every work ultimately comes from God.

How then can these passages contradict one another?

The first speaks of duty.

The second speaks of divine operation.

They fit together perfectly.

The contradiction exists only in the mind of those who insist on attaching human conclusions to God's commands.

The Diatribe repeatedly boasts as though this principle were already proven, as though every command in Scripture automatically established human ability.

Yet it has never demonstrated this from Scripture itself.

It merely assumes it.

And even if its assumption were granted, it would destroy its own position.

For it would prove that Free Will can do everything, whereas the Diatribe itself insists that Free Will cannot will any good thing.

Thus its argument collapses under its own weight.

Section CX

The Diatribe also continually repeats the same objection:

"If man does nothing, then there can be no merit. If there is no merit, there can be neither reward nor punishment."

But once again, this reasoning turns against itself more effectively than against us.

For what does it actually prove?

It proves that all merit depends upon Free Will.

And if merit depends upon Free Will, where then is grace?

Furthermore, if salvation is partly the work of man and partly the work of God, why should man receive the whole reward?

Or will it be said that man receives only part of the reward?

If reward corresponds to merit, then the measure of reward must correspond to the measure of merit.

Yet the Diatribe never explains any of this.

It never defines what this merit is.

It never explains how much belongs to man and how much belongs to God.

It never tells us where the boundary lies.

Its entire discussion therefore concerns something undefined and unknown.

It argues about a thing it cannot describe.

Consequently, it proves nothing.

It has failed to establish its interpretation.

It has failed to prove any contradiction in Scripture.

It has failed to produce a single passage that attributes all things to man.

Its arguments are merely inventions of its own imagination.

Therefore Paul's illustration of the potter and the clay remains untouched and unshaken.

The lesson still stands:

It is not our Free Will that determines what kind of vessels we become.

The potter determines the vessel.

The Creator determines the purpose.

Likewise, Paul's exhortations—such as:

"If a man purge himself from these"—

remain what they were intended to be.

They are descriptions of what ought to be found in God's people.

They are patterns according to which we are to be formed.

They are not demonstrations of our natural ability.

They reveal our duty, not our power.

With this, enough has been said concerning the hardening of Pharaoh, the case of Esau, and the illustration of the potter and the clay.

Section CXI

The Diatribe now turns to the passages which I have cited against Free Will and attempts to refute them.

The first is Genesis 6:3:

"My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh."

The Diatribe offers several explanations in an effort to weaken the force of this passage.

First, it argues that the word "flesh" does not refer to sinful corruption, but merely to human weakness and frailty.

Next, it claims that Moses is speaking only about the people who lived in that generation and not about mankind in general.

Then it narrows the statement still further by arguing that it cannot apply even to every person in that generation, because Noah is clearly excluded.

Finally, appealing to Jerome, it suggests that the Hebrew word may refer to God's mercy rather than His judgment, and therefore expresses divine patience rather than divine severity.

By this reasoning we are apparently expected to conclude that God's dealings with the wicked were acts of mercy, while His dealings with Noah were acts of severity.

Such explanations are little more than trifling evasions.

The Diatribe treats the Scriptures as though they were stories to be manipulated rather than the Word of God to be believed.

What Jerome says carries no authority unless he can prove it from Scripture. Our concern is not with Jerome's opinion, but with the meaning intended by the Holy Spirit.

Let anyone prove from Scripture that the Spirit of God here means divine wrath or indignation.

No such proof exists.

On the contrary, throughout Scripture the Spirit is associated with God's goodness, grace, and kindness.

Even if it could be shown that the word occasionally carries another meaning elsewhere, that would not prove it must have that meaning here.

The same applies to the word "flesh."

The Diatribe insists that it merely means weakness.

Yet Scripture commonly uses the word to describe man's corrupt and sinful condition.

When Paul calls the Corinthians "carnal," he is not speaking of weakness but of sinful attitudes expressed in envy, strife, and division.

He is describing corruption, not incapacity.

Let us therefore leave these speculative interpretations and return to the text itself.

Section CXII

The words of Moses read literally:

"My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for he is flesh."

Taken as they stand, they are perfectly clear.

The context leaves no doubt that they are the words of an angry and offended God.

Everything before and after them points in that direction, and the Flood itself is the final proof.

The reason for God's judgment is plainly stated.

Men had given themselves over to fleshly desires.

The sons of God took wives according to their lusts.

Violence filled the earth.

Human corruption became so great that God determined to destroy the world by the Flood.

Even the delay of one hundred and twenty years was an act of patience.

Had it not been for that delay, judgment would have fallen immediately.

Anyone who carefully reads Moses will see that this is his meaning.

Yet it is hardly surprising that people find Scripture obscure when they approach it in this way—cutting and patching texts together

according to their own imagination, as though they were assembling fragments of poetry.

This practice of forcing hidden meanings into plain passages has done enormous damage to the Church.

Much of it can be traced to the influence of Origen and Jerome, whose fanciful interpretations taught many to neglect the simple and natural meaning of Scripture.

For my part, one point is enough.

The Holy Spirit Himself declares that mankind is "flesh."

And He uses the word in such a sense that His Spirit cannot continue among them indefinitely.

God therefore announces that His Spirit will be withdrawn at the appointed time.

The following verse explains this further when God fixes the period of one hundred and twenty years.

The contrast is clear:

God is Spirit.

Man is flesh.

Because man is flesh, he does not receive the things of the Spirit.

And because God is Spirit, He cannot approve of fleshly corruption.

Therefore His Spirit will no longer strive with them.

The meaning may be understood in this way:

The Spirit of God was working through Noah and the other godly men, warning the wicked through preaching, exhortation, and holy example.

To strive or contend with men means to confront them through the ministry of the Word—to rebuke, admonish, and call them to repentance.

Yet all these efforts were in vain.

The more they were warned, the more hardened they became.

Instead of receiving correction, they despised it.

And this remains true wherever the Word of God is proclaimed.

Those who reject it often become more hardened the more clearly they hear it.

Thus judgment is hastened.

The Flood came because men not only sinned but despised the grace that called them to repentance.

As Christ Himself said:

"Light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than

light." (John 3:19)

Therefore, if God Himself declares that men are flesh, then flesh can produce nothing but flesh.

So far from proving the existence of Free Will, this passage demonstrates its bondage.

For if men become worse even while the Spirit of God is striving with them through the preaching of His Word, what can they possibly do when left to themselves and deprived of that Spirit altogether?

Section CXIII

Nor does it help your argument to say that Moses was speaking only about the people who lived in his own day. The same principle applies to all mankind, because all men are flesh. As Christ declares:

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6).

He goes on to show how deep and universal this corruption is when He says:

"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

Every Christian, therefore, should understand that Origen, Jerome, and all who follow them are greatly mistaken when they claim that the word flesh in passages such as these refers merely to weakness or natural frailty rather than to corrupt affections and a fallen nature.

When Paul writes to the Corinthians:

"For ye are yet carnal" (1 Corinthians 3:3),

he is speaking of ungodliness and sinful behaviour. His meaning is that some among them were still acting in a fleshly and worldly manner. Even believers themselves, though justified by the Spirit, are called carnal whenever they yield to fleshly desires and think according to the fallen nature.

As a general rule when reading Scripture, wherever flesh is contrasted with spirit, the term flesh should be understood as everything that stands opposed to the Spirit of God. For example, when Christ says:

"The flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63),

He is not speaking merely of the physical body, but of fallen human nature in its inability to produce spiritual life.

However, where the term is used by itself and not contrasted with spirit, it may simply refer to bodily nature or physical humanity. Examples include:

"They twain shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24),

"My flesh is meat indeed" (John 6:55),

and

"The Word was made flesh" (John 1:14).

In such passages, the word may often be understood as referring to the human body or human nature generally.

Indeed, in the Hebrew language, the single word translated flesh often carries the meaning of both flesh and body. It would have been helpful if these two ideas had always been distinguished more clearly in translation.

My argument from Genesis 6 therefore remains untouched. The passage still stands firmly against the doctrine of Free Will.

For flesh is shown to be exactly what Paul describes in Romans 8 as being unable to submit itself to God:

"The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

And even the Diatribe itself has already admitted that fallen man cannot will anything truly good.

Therefore, if all men by nature are flesh, and if flesh cannot submit itself to God, then Free Will possesses no power to produce spiritual good. The testimony of Scripture remains unchanged and stands directly opposed to the doctrine of Free Will.

Section CXIV

Another passage is found in Genesis 8:

"The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth."

Likewise, in Genesis 6:

"Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

The Diatribe attempts to evade the force of these passages by saying that the inclination to evil found in most men does not entirely remove the freedom of the will.

But I ask, does God here speak of only "most men"? Does He not speak of all men?

After the Flood, God promises those then living, and all who would come after them, that He would never again destroy the earth with a flood because of man. He gives the reason Himself:

"For the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth."

It is as though God were saying, "If I were to deal with mankind according to their wickedness, I should never cease from sending judgment upon the earth. Therefore, I will no longer act according to what they deserve."

You see, therefore, that both before and after the Flood God declares that man is evil. What, then, becomes of the Diatribe's claim that only "most men" are intended?

The Scriptures speak universally. They make no exception.

Moreover, the Diatribe weakens the force of these words by reducing them to a mere tendency or inclination towards evil. Yet Moses says much more than this. The whole language of the passage is directed against every faculty of man—his thoughts, his imagination, his understanding, and the very heart and will themselves.

Why does the Diatribe appeal to the Hebrew language? Moses leaves no room for such evasions.

The Hebrew text reads in substance:

"Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is only evil all the days."

He does not say that some thoughts are evil, nor merely that man has a tendency towards evil. He says that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is evil continually.

The description is absolute.

The whole nature of man is corrupted. Whatever proceeds from him is evil because the source itself is evil. As Christ teaches, an evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit.

The corruption lies not merely in particular actions but in the very root from which all actions spring.

The Diatribe then objects:

"If no part of salvation depends upon free-will, why are commands given? Why are exhortations and calls to repentance addressed to men?"

I answer as before.

The same objection may be raised against every commandment of God.

Why does God command, instruct, warn, exhort, and threaten, if all

things come to pass according to His sovereign purpose?

The answer is that these things are given to teach man his duty, to humble him under the knowledge of his own helplessness, and to reveal his need of divine grace.

The commandments do not prove man's ability. Rather, they expose his inability.

By them God shows us what we ought to do, not what we can do in our own strength.

Thus the Scriptures continue to overthrow the freedom of the will and to demonstrate man's complete dependence upon the grace of God.

Section CXV

The third passage is that of Isaiah 40:

"She hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

The Diatribe interprets these words as referring to divine punishment, not to the grace bestowed in place of deserved punishment.

I hear your interpretation—and Jerome's also—but what concern have I with Jerome when Isaiah himself speaks in the clearest possible language? Jerome, though learned in many things, often displayed poor judgment in his handling of Scripture. Moreover, did we not agree at the beginning of this discussion that our appeal should be to Scripture itself and not to the opinions of commentators?

This chapter of Isaiah is universally understood by the Evangelists as referring to John the Baptist and the coming of Christ. The chapter opens:

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God."

These are not words of judgment but words of consolation.

Immediately afterwards comes:

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness."

The whole chapter concerns the proclamation of the Gospel and the remission of sins.

Yet Jerome, following his usual method, pursues a historical interpretation among the Jews and then overlays it with allegory, thereby obscuring the plain meaning of the text. In doing so, he transforms a passage about forgiveness into a passage about vengeance.

But let us consider the prophet's own words.

"Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem."

The Hebrew expression literally means, "Speak to the heart." It

signifies speaking kindly, tenderly, and comfortingly.

An example may be found in Genesis 34, where Shechem "spake kindly unto the damsel" after wronging Dinah. He sought to comfort and reassure her with gentle words.

Isaiah therefore commands that words of consolation be proclaimed to Jerusalem. What those comforting words are, he immediately explains:

"That her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

The term translated "warfare" is often understood by some to mean an appointed period of service. Yet I take the word in its ordinary and grammatical sense, namely, warfare or military service.

The prophet is describing the burdensome service of God's people under the Law. They were like soldiers engaged in a difficult campaign. The Apostle Paul frequently uses the same imagery. Timothy is exhorted to be a good soldier of Jesus Christ. Believers are called to fight the good fight of faith. Christians are runners in a race and soldiers equipped with spiritual armour.

Isaiah therefore proclaims that this exhausting warfare under the Law is coming to an end.

The people had laboured under a yoke which neither they nor their fathers were able to bear. Now they are to be delivered from that burden and brought into the freedom of the Gospel and the life of the Spirit.

This deliverance is not granted because of their merits. Quite the opposite.

It is granted because their sins are forgiven.

The prophet's words are plain and unmistakable:

"Her warfare is accomplished, her iniquity is pardoned."

This reveals that those under the Law had not fulfilled the Law. Rather, they had become soldiers of sin. Their efforts had only demonstrated their inability.

It is as though God were saying:

"I must forgive them if My Law is ever to be fulfilled in them. Indeed, I must remove the Law as a means of attaining righteousness, for I see that they cannot do otherwise than sin. The more they strive in their own strength, the more they discover their weakness."

The Hebrew expression for pardoned iniquity signifies that forgiveness is granted freely and graciously, not earned by merit or obtained through works.

The prophet continues:

"She hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

This does not refer merely to punishment. Rather, it points to the abundant grace bestowed through Christ.

The believer receives a twofold blessing:

First, the forgiveness of sins.

Second, victory over the Law which condemns because of sin.

The Law, which once exposed guilt and brought fear, loses its power to condemn when sin is forgiven. Thus Christ grants a twofold liberty to His people.

This blessing comes from the hand of the Lord. It is not attained through human effort or free-will. It is received from Christ, the victorious Saviour, who freely bestows His grace.

Accordingly, Isaiah is not teaching that grace is given because of human merit. Quite the reverse.

He teaches that grace is given because of sin and demerit.

Man contributes nothing except his need.

Therefore this magnificent passage stands as a powerful witness against Free-will. It demonstrates that grace is bestowed, not because men deserve it, nor because they have exerted themselves sufficiently, but because they are sinners in need of mercy.

Free-will, with all its powers, can do no more than wage war against sin unsuccessfully. The very Law which it imagines will help it only reveals its weakness and makes its misery all the more evident.

The more a man strives to establish his own righteousness, the more clearly his inability is exposed. Thus the Law humbles him and drives him to seek salvation entirely in the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

Section CXVI

But as to the Diatribe's argument:

"Although sin abounds through the Law, and where sin abounded grace did much more abound, it does not therefore follow that man, with God's assistance, cannot prepare himself for the favour of God by works morally good."

What extraordinary reasoning is this!

Surely the Diatribe is not speaking from its own understanding, but merely repeating something borrowed from others, without considering

what it actually means. It neither sees nor hears the force of the words it employs.

For if sin abounds through the Law, how can a sinner prepare himself for grace by moral works? If the Law itself cannot produce righteousness, how can works performed under the Law accomplish what the Law cannot?

What does it mean that sin abounds through the Law, except that all works done according to the Law are found wanting and reveal man's sinfulness? The Law exposes sin rather than cures it.

Moreover, what does the Diatribe mean when it speaks of man being assisted by the help of God? Are we discussing divine assistance, or are we discussing Free-will?

Nothing is impossible if God Himself accomplishes it. But that is not the question before us. The Diatribe continually forgets the issue under debate and wanders off into irrelevant arguments.

It then appeals to the example of Cornelius the centurion in Acts 10, observing that his prayers and alms pleased God before he was baptised and before he had received the Holy Spirit.

I have read Luke's account many times, yet nowhere do I find any statement that Cornelius performed morally good works apart from the Holy Spirit, as the Diatribe imagines.

On the contrary, Luke describes him as:

"A just man, and one that feared God."

How can a man be called just and God-fearing if he is entirely without the Holy Spirit? To describe a man in such terms while denying the Spirit's work in him would be absurd.

Furthermore, the whole narrative demonstrates that Cornelius was already accepted by God. The heavenly vision given to Peter confirms this and rebukes Peter for doubting what God had already cleansed.

Luke's language, together with the whole context, plainly indicates that Cornelius was already under the gracious operation of God.

Yet the Diatribe and its supporters remain blind to what is so obvious. The evidence lies before them in the text itself, yet they refuse to see it.

Such careless reading of Scripture is remarkable. Then, having neglected its plain meaning, they complain that the Scriptures are obscure and difficult!

But even if we grant that Cornelius had not yet been baptised, and had not yet heard the full preaching concerning Christ's death and

resurrection, does it therefore follow that he was without the Holy Spirit?

If that reasoning were true, then we would also have to conclude that John the Baptist, his parents Zacharias and Elisabeth, the Virgin Mary, and Simeon were all without the Holy Spirit before Christ's public ministry.

Such a conclusion is plainly impossible.

Let us therefore abandon these dark and confused notions. The example of Cornelius proves the very opposite of what the Diatribe intends. It demonstrates that whenever a man truly fears God and seeks Him, this is already the result of God's gracious work within him, and not the product of an independent Free-will.

Section CXVII

The fourth passage is from the same chapter of Isaiah:

"All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the Spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it."

The Diatribe complains that this passage is being treated unfairly when it is applied to the discussion of grace and Free-will.

Why does it object?

Because, it says, Jerome interprets "spirit" as meaning God's indignation, and "flesh" as signifying the frail and weak condition of man, which cannot stand before God.

Once again, however, we are presented not with Isaiah's own words but with Jerome's opinions. It seems that I must spend more effort contending with the authority of commentators than with the Diatribe itself.

I have already stated my judgment concerning Jerome's interpretation.

Indeed, let me compare Jerome with himself.

If "flesh" means merely man's frailty and weakness, and "spirit" means divine indignation, what kind of victory is this for God's wrath? Is God's indignation displayed merely in overthrowing weak and miserable creatures who are already unable to stand?

The interpretation becomes even more absurd when Jerome explains:

"The flower of the grass"

as the glory that arises from earthly prosperity.

He says that the Jews gloried in their Temple, circumcision, and

sacrifices, while the Greeks gloried in wisdom. Thus, according to him, the flower of the grass signifies worldly glory, human righteousness, and worldly wisdom.

But how are righteousness and wisdom merely "earthly prosperity"?

And what has all this to do with Isaiah's actual words?

The prophet explains his own meaning plainly enough when he says:

"Surely the people is grass."

He does not say:

"Surely the frailty of man is grass."

He says:

"The people."

And he says it emphatically.

Who are "the people"?

Certainly not merely the weak or infirm among mankind.

The whole human race is included.

Whether Jerome means by "man's infirmity" the entire fallen condition of humanity or merely man's miserable state, I cannot tell. In either case, his interpretation falls far short of the prophet's meaning.

For Isaiah is not describing a few weak individuals. He is declaring the condition of all mankind.

The greatness of God's power is not displayed merely in withering frail creatures. Rather, it is displayed in bringing low the proud, humbling the mighty, casting down human glory, and exposing the emptiness of all confidence in the flesh.

As Mary sings:

"He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree."

Isaiah's purpose is therefore much broader than Jerome allows.

The prophet teaches that everything belonging to fallen man—his strength, wisdom, righteousness, glory, and achievements—is no more enduring than grass.

When the Spirit of the Lord blows upon it, all human greatness withers and disappears.

This passage therefore stands firmly against Free-will.

For if all flesh is grass, then every power and ability belonging to man is included. Whatever proceeds from man himself is weak, temporary, and unable to stand before God.

Only that which comes from the Spirit of God endures.

The glory of man fades.

The grace of God remains.

Section CXVIII

But let us put aside these fanciful interpretations and take Isaiah's words exactly as they stand.

"The people is grass."

The word "people" does not refer merely to the frailty or weakness of human nature. It embraces everything found among mankind—the rich, the wise, the righteous, the powerful, the noble, and even those regarded as saints.

Unless someone wishes to argue that the Pharisees, the elders, the rulers, the nobles, and the wealthy were not part of the people of Israel, the prophet's words must be understood universally.

The "flower of the grass" is rightly called their glory, for their confidence and boasting rested in their kingdom, their government, their law, their righteousness, their wisdom, and their supposed favour with God. Paul describes these very privileges in Romans chapters 2, 3, and 9.

When Isaiah declares,

"All flesh is grass,"

what does he mean except that all people are grass?

He does not merely say "flesh"; he says "all flesh."

Everything belonging to man is included—his soul, his body, his intellect, his reason, his judgment, and every quality which men regard as excellent.

When the prophet says,

"All flesh is grass,"

he excludes nothing except the Spirit of God, which causes the grass to wither.

Likewise, when he says,

"The people is grass,"

he leaves nothing outside his description.

Therefore, whether you speak of Free-will or of any other human excellence, whether the highest or the lowest among men, Isaiah includes it all under the terms "flesh" and "grass."

The prophet himself explains his meaning. In this passage the words "people," "flesh," and "grass" signify the same thing.

Furthermore, you yourself admit that the wisdom of the Greeks and the righteousness of the Jews were withered by the Gospel and were merely the flower of the grass.

But were not these things considered the highest achievements of mankind?

Was not Greek wisdom regarded as the summit of human reason?

Was not Jewish righteousness regarded as the highest form of religious devotion?

If these are not man's greatest attainments, then what is?

Yet Isaiah sweeps them all away with a single declaration:

"All flesh is grass."

And you yourself have acknowledged that these things belong to the grass.

You demand proof from Scripture that whatever is highest and best in man is nevertheless flesh.

Very well. Here is Isaiah, crying aloud that the whole people, apart from the Spirit of God, are flesh.

You also have your own admission that the wisdom of the Greeks is grass. And if it is grass, it is flesh.

Unless you are prepared to say that Greek wisdom had nothing to do with reason or understanding, you have already conceded the point.

If you will not listen to me, then listen to your own words. For in this matter, though unintentionally, you have spoken the truth.

Moreover, you have the testimony of Christ Himself:

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

This passage makes the matter perfectly clear.

Everything not born of the Spirit is flesh.

If this were not so, Christ's distinction would collapse. He divides all mankind into only classes: flesh and spirit.

There is no third category.

Yet the Diatribe passes lightly over these words, as though they provided no answer at all. Instead of considering the conclusion that necessarily follows from Christ's teaching, it merely observes that believers are born of God, become the children of God, and are made new creatures.

All of this is true.

But it carefully avoids the obvious implication—that all who are not

born of the Spirit remain flesh.

Thus, rather than facing the force of Christ's argument, the Diatribe slips away and occupies itself with side issues, imagining that such evasions will go unnoticed.

But the truth remains.

Christ divides mankind into two groups only:

Those who are born of the flesh, and those who are born of the Spirit.

Whatever is not Spirit is flesh.

And whatever is flesh can neither please God nor produce the righteousness which God requires.

Section CXIX

It is difficult to refrain from concluding that, in this matter, the Diatribe is acting both craftily and disingenuously.

For anyone who handles the Scriptures in the manner practised here may readily pretend that he is still seeking instruction, that he has not yet fully understood the Scriptures, and that he remains willing to be taught. Yet, at the same time, he may have no real desire to learn at all. Instead, he merely uses such language to cast doubt upon the clear testimony of Scripture and to conceal his determined attachment to his own opinions.

This is precisely what the Jews continue to do. They maintain that neither Christ, nor the Apostles, nor the Church have proved their claims from the Scriptures. Likewise, the Papists insist that the Scriptures remain uncertain and obscure, even while the truth stands before them as plainly as stones crying out.

Perhaps the Diatribe is waiting for us to produce a text containing these exact words:

"The principal part of man is flesh."

Or perhaps:

"That which is most excellent in man is flesh."

Otherwise, it imagines itself victorious.

But this is no different from a Jew demanding a prophecy which literally states:

"Jesus, the son of the carpenter, born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem, is the Messiah, the Son of God."

When pressed by the plain meaning of Scripture, the Diatribe suddenly demands exact letters and syllables. Yet elsewhere, when both

the words and the meaning stand plainly against it, it immediately flees to figures of speech, difficulties of interpretation, and appeals to commentators.

There is no place where it does not invent some means of evading the force of Scripture.

At one moment it seeks refuge in the Fathers.

At another it appeals to human reason.

When these fail, it diverts attention to matters entirely irrelevant.

Its chief concern is always the same: to avoid facing the passage under discussion.

What shall I call such behaviour?

Proteus himself was not more changeable.

Yet all these evasions ultimately fail.

The Arians once boasted that the word homoousios could not be found in Scripture. They considered this a great triumph, despite the fact that the truth represented by the word could be abundantly proved from Scripture by other expressions.

Whether such behaviour demonstrates a sincere desire to learn, let any honest person judge.

Very well, then.

We freely confess that the exact phrase:

"That which is most excellent in man is flesh"

does not appear in Scripture.

Take your victory if you wish.

But what sort of victory is it?

For while that precise expression is absent, Scripture plainly teaches something far stronger.

It teaches not merely that one part of man is flesh, nor merely that his highest faculties are flesh, but that the whole man is flesh.

Indeed, it teaches that the whole people are flesh.

More than that, it teaches that the whole human race is flesh.

For Christ Himself declares:

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh."

What will the Diatribe do with these words?

Will it once again resort to clever distinctions, evasive interpretations, and the opinions of commentators?

Will it turn aside to discuss some entirely unrelated matter in order to avoid the force of Christ's statement?

The truth remains unchanged.

We not only believe but also observe that the whole human race is born of the flesh.

Therefore we are compelled to believe Christ when He tells us what we cannot see with our eyes—that the whole race of mankind is flesh.

What room is left, then, for endless speculation about whether the highest powers of man are included?

If the whole man is flesh, then all his powers are included.

If the whole race is flesh, then every faculty of that race is included.

The body is included.

The soul is included.

Reason is included.

Judgment is included.

Wisdom is included.

Virtue is included.

Everything that belongs to man is included.

All his powers.

All his works.

All his virtues.

All his vices.

All his wisdom.

All his folly.

All his righteousness.

All his unrighteousness.

Everything is flesh.

For everything proceeds from man himself and savours of the flesh.

As Paul says, such things are:

"without the glory of God."

And where the Spirit of God is absent, there can be nothing but flesh.

Section CXX

As for the Diatribe's assertion:

"Yet every affection of man is not flesh. There is an affection called soul, and another called spirit, by which men aspire to what is morally good. Thus the philosophers taught that a man ought rather to suffer a thousand deaths than commit one disgraceful act, even if no one would ever know of it and God Himself would pardon it."

I answer: those who know nothing readily believe and say anything.

Let the Diatribe produce, from the whole human race, a single individual—though he were ten times greater than Socrates himself—who actually performed what these philosophers taught.

Why speak in such lofty terms when no such examples can be found?

Indeed, how could they aspire to that which is truly good when they did not even know what true good was?

Perhaps the Diatribe will point to those celebrated examples often praised among men: those who died for their country, for their wives and children, or for their parents; those who refused treachery or falsehood; those who endured great suffering for honour's sake, such as Mucius Scaevola, Regulus, and others.

But what do such examples prove?

Nothing more than an outward display of virtue.

Who has looked into their hearts?

Even from the appearance of their actions it is evident that they acted for their own glory. Indeed, they freely admitted as much and openly boasted of it.

The Romans themselves testified that their courage and virtue were driven by a desire for glory.

The Greeks pursued the same object.

The Jews did likewise.

The whole human race acts in the same manner.

Before men, such conduct may appear noble and praiseworthy.

Before God, however, nothing could be further from true righteousness.

Indeed, it is the very opposite.

For in seeking glory for themselves, they robbed God of the glory that belongs to Him alone.

And what greater sacrilege can there be than this?

Thus, when these men appeared at their most virtuous, they were often furthest from true goodness.

When they shone most brightly in the eyes of the world, they were most deeply corrupted in the sight of God.

How could they act for the glory of God when they neither knew God nor sought His glory?

Not because God's glory was hidden from them, but because the flesh would not allow them to see it. Their own ambition blinded them.

This, then, is the "spirit" and the "higher part of man" of which the Diatribe boasts.

It is a thief of God's glory and a usurper of His Majesty.

And it is most dangerous precisely when it appears most admirable.

The greater the outward virtue, the greater the temptation to self-glory.

Let the Diatribe deny, if it can, that such things are flesh.

Nor do I believe that the Diatribe is truly offended by the Scriptural language which calls man either "flesh" or "spirit."

A Latin writer would simply say that a man is either carnal or spiritual.

The Hebrew language often expresses the same truth more forcefully by calling a man "flesh" or "spirit."

In ordinary speech we use similar expressions.

We say:

"The wolf is destruction to the flock."

Or:

"Moisture is life to the young corn."

Or again:

"That man is wickedness itself."

So the Scriptures call man "flesh" because he savours only the things of the flesh.

Likewise, they call a man "spirit" because he delights in, seeks, performs, and endures the things of the Spirit.

But perhaps the Diatribe will still ask:

"If the whole man is flesh, and even that which is highest and best in man is flesh, must everything called flesh therefore be regarded as ungodly?"

I answer: yes.

Whoever is without the Spirit of God is ungodly.

The Scripture teaches that the Spirit is given in order to justify the ungodly.

Christ Himself declares:

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh."

And He immediately adds that such a person:

"cannot see the kingdom of God."

Therefore whatever is flesh is outside the kingdom of God, under His wrath, and estranged from His grace.

And if a man is outside the kingdom of God, where else can he be

except under the kingdom of Satan?

There is no middle ground.

The kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan stand in complete opposition to one another.

Accordingly, the highest virtues found among unbelievers, the noblest teachings of the philosophers, and the most celebrated achievements of mankind may appear glorious before the world.

Yet before God they remain flesh.

And because they proceed from flesh, they belong not to the kingdom of God but to the kingdom of Satan.

Thus the Scriptures teach that even man's greatest natural excellencies, when separated from the Spirit of God, remain ungodly, sinful, and incapable of pleasing Him.

Section CXXI

But let us suppose, for a moment, that the Diatribe's position is correct—that not every affection of man is flesh; that there exists within man some sound and good principle, some noble spirit untouched by corruption.

Consider what absurd consequences would follow.

And I am not speaking merely of human reason or philosophy, but of the very foundations of the Christian faith itself.

For if the highest and best part of man is not ungodly, not corrupt, not helpless, but remains sound and capable of doing good, what need has it of Christ?

What sort of Redeemer does Christ become?

Must the value of His blood be reduced so greatly that it redeems only the lower and baser elements of human nature, while the noblest and most excellent part remains healthy and righteous by itself?

If this were true, Christ would be only a partial Redeemer.

He would redeem merely the inferior part of man, while the superior part would save itself.

Indeed, the higher part would become its own saviour.

You may choose whichever way you please to state it, but the conclusion remains the same.

If the better part of man is sound, it has no need of Christ.

And if it has no need of Christ, it possesses a glory greater than Christ's own.

For it accomplishes its own preservation and righteousness without Him.

Likewise, the kingdom of Satan would be reduced to almost nothing.

His dominion would extend only over the lower faculties of man, while the superior powers would remain free and self-governing.

According to such reasoning, man would be exalted above both Christ and the devil.

He would become a god among gods and a lord among lords.

What, then, becomes of the Diatribe's earlier claim that Free-will can will nothing truly good?

Here it teaches something entirely different.

Here the principal part of man is represented as sound, righteous, and capable of meritorious good.

Indeed, it is portrayed as requiring neither Christ nor grace.

Such confusion is the inevitable result of trusting human reason rather than Scripture.

For Scripture knows nothing of such distinctions.

If Christ is truly:

"The Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,"

then the whole world lies under sin.

If He came to redeem the world, then the whole world needed redemption.

If the whole world needed redemption, then the whole world was condemned.

And if the whole world was condemned, then no part of man can claim exemption.

The distinction between a superior part and an inferior part profits nothing.

The Scripture condemns man as a whole.

When it speaks of the world, it includes all mankind.

When it speaks of flesh, it includes all that belongs to man apart from the Spirit of God.

All human faculties are involved.

All human powers are included.

Reason is included.

Will is included.

Judgment is included.

Affections are included.

Nothing is exempted.

Therefore, if Christ is the Redeemer of the world, the world must be wholly lost.

And if the world is wholly lost, then every part of man stands equally in need of grace.

Thus the Diatribe's distinction collapses.

The whole man is fallen.

The whole man is flesh.

And the whole man must be redeemed by Christ alone.

Section CXXII

The Diatribe asks:

"If the whole man, even after being regenerated by faith, is nothing but flesh, where then is the spirit born of the Spirit? Where is the child of God? Where is the new creature?"

To which I reply: these questions merely demonstrate how dangerous it is to handle sacred things carelessly.

But first, my dear Diatribe, where have you discovered that I ever taught such a thing?

Who has said that the man born of the Spirit is nothing but flesh?

Certainly not I.

I have always maintained a clear distinction between flesh and spirit, and I do so because the Scriptures themselves make that distinction.

I teach, according to the Word of God, that the man who has not been regenerated by faith is flesh.

But I also teach that the man who has been regenerated by faith is no longer flesh in the same sense, though remnants of the flesh remain within him and continue to war against the Spirit.

This is precisely the conflict described by the Apostle Paul.

The believer possesses the first-fruits of the Spirit, yet still experiences the presence of indwelling sin. Thus flesh and spirit contend within him.

Therefore, if the Diatribe seeks to accuse me of teaching that the regenerate man is nothing but flesh, it brings a charge that is entirely false.

Indeed, it would be difficult to invent a more unjust accusation.

The real problem is that the Diatribe either does not understand my position, or has become so confused by the weight of the argument that

it no longer knows what it is opposing.

For consider the contradiction into which it falls.

It appeals to the authority of the ancient writers and declares:

"There are certain seeds of good implanted in the minds of men."

Yet earlier it insisted that:

"Free-will cannot will any thing good."

How are these two statements to be reconciled?

If there are truly seeds of good within man, how can Free-will be incapable of willing good?

And if Free-will cannot will good, what becomes of these supposed seeds of goodness?

The Diatribe continually forgets its own position.

It begins with one assertion and then quietly abandons it for another.

Again and again I find myself compelled to remind it of the very question under debate.

No sooner has it established one principle than it departs from it and embraces something altogether different.

Such inconsistency reveals the weakness of its case.

For the Scriptures teach neither that man possesses natural seeds of spiritual goodness, nor that he is able by his own powers to prepare himself for grace.

Rather, they teach that all spiritual life comes from God.

Whatever good exists in the believer is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever belongs to fallen man by nature remains flesh.

Therefore the distinction is plain.

The unregenerate man is flesh.

The regenerate man possesses the Spirit, though remnants of the flesh still remain.

And all true goodness proceeds, not from natural powers implanted in man, but from the gracious work of God within him.

Section CXXIII

Another passage is found in Jeremiah 10:

"O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps."

The Diatribe replies that this passage concerns the events of prosperity and adversity rather than the power of Free-will.

Once again, however, it introduces an interpretation of its own invention, as though Scripture were entirely subject to its authority.

But why should we accept Erasmus' opinion without proof?

Let him demonstrate from the context that this is the prophet's meaning, and then we shall consider it.

As for myself, I find from the context that Jeremiah, after labouring earnestly among a rebellious people, had become convinced that his preaching could accomplish nothing unless God Himself worked inwardly upon the heart.

He saw that man, left to himself, could neither hear the Word of God rightly nor will that which is good.

Recognising this, he turned to God and prayed that, if correction were necessary, it might be administered with mercy and judgment rather than in wrath.

He feared being abandoned to the same hardness and unbelief into which the ungodly had been left.

But let us grant, for argument's sake, that the passage concerns earthly prosperity and adversity.

Even then, the Diatribe gains nothing.

Indeed, its interpretation serves to overthrow Free-will more thoroughly than my own.

For if man has no control over the events of this present life—over matters concerning wealth, success, health, reputation, and all those things over which he was originally given dominion—how much less can he control the grace of God, which depends entirely upon the will of God alone?

If man cannot preserve a single coin, nor even one hair of his head, by his own power, how shall he obtain eternal salvation?

If he cannot secure the creature, how shall he secure the Creator?

What greater folly could be imagined?

The attempt to apply Free-will to the things of God is infinitely more absurd than applying it to the affairs of this life.

For in spiritual matters man is even more helpless and more thoroughly deceived.

Thus this interpretation proves the opposite of what the Diatribe intends.

It denies liberty in lesser things while asserting liberty in the greatest things.

It is as though a man were to say:

"Codrus cannot pay a penny, but he can pay ten thousand pounds."

Such reasoning is plainly ridiculous.

I am astonished that the Diatribe, after spending so much effort attacking the doctrine that all things occur according to necessity, now admits that earthly events themselves occur apart from man's control.

The Diatribe continues:

"Even if this passage is applied to Free-will, all acknowledge that no man can maintain a right course of life without the grace of God. Nevertheless, we still strive with all our powers. We pray daily, 'O Lord my God, direct my steps.' Therefore, he who seeks divine help does not cease from his own efforts."

What sort of argument is this?

The question under discussion is whether man strives by his own power.

Yet instead of proving this, the Diatribe merely proves that a believer prays.

But prayer itself is not an act of independent Free-will.

The Apostle teaches:

"The Spirit itself maketh intercession for us."

The believer prays because the Holy Spirit is at work within him.

How, then, does the activity of the Holy Spirit prove the power of Free-will?

Has the Diatribe now made the Holy Spirit and Free-will the same thing?

Or are we discussing what the Spirit can accomplish?

The argument proves nothing.

Therefore the passage from Jeremiah remains untouched and unshaken.

The Diatribe has not answered it. It has merely covered it with a gloss of its own invention and then asked us to accept that gloss as though it were proof.

I too could invent interpretations of my own and demand that others believe them.

But such methods settle nothing.

The words of Jeremiah still stand:

"It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps."

And those words remain a powerful testimony against the freedom

of the will.

Section CXXIV

There is also that passage in Proverbs 16:

"It is of man to prepare the heart: but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD."

The Diatribe says that this refers only to the events of things.

As though the Diatribe's own assertion should satisfy us without any proof.

However, it is sufficient for our purpose that, even if these passages concern the events of things, our previous argument remains victorious. For if there is no Free-will in our own affairs and works, much less can there be any Free-will in divine things and works.

But observe the Diatribe's remarkable reasoning:

"How can it be of man to prepare the heart when Luther teaches that all things happen by necessity?"

I answer:

If, as you say, the events of things are not in our power, how can it be in man to perform the acts which bring them about?

The very answer which you gave to me must now be received by yourself.

Indeed, we are commanded to labour all the more precisely because future events are unknown to us.

As Ecclesiastes says:

"In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that."

— Ecclesiastes 11:6

All future things are uncertain to us in knowledge, though they are necessary in their event.

Their necessity produces in us the fear of God, so that we do not become presumptuous or secure.

Their uncertainty teaches us trust, so that we do not sink into despair.

Section CXXV

But the Diatribe returns once more to its favourite argument, insisting that the Book of Proverbs contains many passages supporting Free-will.

It cites, for example:

"Commit thy works unto the Lord."

"Do you hear?" asks the Diatribe. "Thy works."

Its reasoning is simple enough. Because the passage contains an imperative command and addresses man directly, it concludes that man must possess the ability to perform what is commanded.

Thus:

"Commit thy works"

must mean:

"You have the power to commit your works."

And therefore Free-will is established.

By the same reasoning, one might argue from the words:

"I am thy God,"

that man makes God to be his God.

Or from the words:

"Thy faith hath saved thee,"

that man creates his own faith.

And thus, by such methods, Free-will would be proved.

I am not speaking merely in jest. I am exposing the weakness of the Diatribe's entire argument.

For throughout this controversy it has relied almost entirely upon commands, conditions, pronouns, and forms of speech, as though the mere existence of a command proves man's ability to fulfil it.

The same chapter of Proverbs contains another passage:

"The Lord hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil."

The Diatribe attempts to soften these words by explaining that God never created any creature evil.

But that is not the point at issue.

I am not speaking about the original act of creation, but about God's continual government and operation in the world.

God does not create wickedness as wickedness.

Nor does He create men as wicked creatures in the beginning.

Rather, from a corrupt and fallen stock, wicked men arise under God's sovereign government.

The fault lies not with the Creator but with the corrupted material from which sinful men proceed.

The Diatribe then turns to Proverbs 21:

"The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; as the rivers of water, he

turneth it whithersoever he will."

It objects that to incline the heart is not the same thing as to compel it.

But we are not discussing compulsion.

We are discussing the certainty and irresistibility of God's government.

God's inclining of the heart is not a passive or idle thing.

It is His active and effectual operation.

The king cannot escape or frustrate it.

His will moves in the direction God ordains.

God gives the will its course, and the will acts according to the nature and disposition which God governs.

The Diatribe further argues that Solomon is speaking only of kings and rulers, not of mankind generally.

At last it concedes that God may indeed incline a king toward evil actions, but only by permitting him to follow his own inclinations in order to punish others.

I answer that whether one uses the word "permit" or the word "incline," the result is the same.

Nothing occurs apart from God's will and operation.

The king's will cannot escape the action of the Almighty.

Every human will is carried where God wills and directs, whether toward good or toward evil.

As for my applying Solomon's words concerning kings to mankind generally, I did so neither carelessly nor without reason.

If the heart of a king—which appears to be the freest and most powerful will among men—is nevertheless governed by God, how much more must the wills of ordinary men be governed by Him.

The argument is perfectly valid.

What is true of the king is true of every man.

If even the most powerful ruler cannot will independently of God's direction, neither can anyone else.

The Scriptures repeatedly teach this principle.

The example of Balaam is another clear illustration.

He was unable to speak what he wished.

His words were restrained and directed by God.

Such examples demonstrate that man is not master of his own actions as he imagines.

Were it otherwise, these examples could not stand in Scripture as they do.

The Diatribe, having observed that many passages similar to those cited by Luther may be found throughout the Book of Proverbs, now argues that such texts can, by means of a suitable interpretation, be made to support either side of the debate concerning Free-will.

It then turns to what it regards as Luther's strongest and most formidable weapon:

"Without me ye can do nothing." (John 15:5)

I must admire this remarkable method of argument.

Whenever a passage of Scripture appears to oppose Free-will, we are simply instructed to modify its meaning by means of a convenient interpretation, until it says whatever we wish it to say.

In this way, Scripture ceases to teach us, and we begin teaching Scripture.

The Diatribe imagines that if this one passage can be weakened, then all the others may be dismissed with equal ease.

Let us therefore examine how it proposes to conquer this supposed Achilles.

The entire argument centres upon the single word:

"Nothing."

The Diatribe labours at great length to prove that "nothing" may sometimes mean something imperfect or incomplete.

According to the old scholastic interpretation, the words:

"Without me ye can do nothing"

should be understood as meaning:

"Without me ye can do nothing perfectly."

This ancient gloss, worn out long ago, is now brought forward again as though it were some newly discovered insight.

Yet it is fascinating to observe how poorly this interpretation agrees with the Diatribe's own explanation of the passage.

For the Diatribe itself acknowledges that Christ is speaking of evangelical fruits, and that such fruits can be produced only by those who remain in the Vine, which is Christ.

In making this admission, it effectively surrenders the entire argument.

For if evangelical fruits can be produced only by those who abide in Christ, then they cannot be produced by those who are outside Christ.

The passage stands exactly as Christ spoke it.

The Diatribe, however, pays little attention to the context.

It concerns itself almost entirely with proving that the word "nothing" may sometimes be understood to mean "something in a small degree."

But the question is not what a word may possibly mean in some distant circumstance.

The question is what Christ means in this passage.

All this interpretation accomplishes is to make Scripture uncertain and obscure.

And this is precisely the Diatribe's constant objective.

It seeks to render the Scriptures doubtful so that it may avoid submitting to their authority, while preserving room for the opinions of men.

Yet what kind of religion is this, which makes the words of God uncertain and the words of men reliable?

Section CXXVII

It is remarkable to observe how this interpretation of the word nothing continues to contradict itself.

The Diatribe argues that nothing may be understood to mean something in part or something imperfect. Yet it also says:

"In this sense the passage is perfectly true, for Christ is speaking of evangelical fruits, which cannot be produced except by those who abide in the vine, which is Christ."

Notice what the Diatribe is forced to admit.

It openly confesses that evangelical fruit cannot be produced except by those who remain in Christ. It says the same thing even while trying to explain away the word nothing.

But perhaps, according to this convenient method of interpretation, the word cannot should also be redefined. Perhaps it should mean that evangelical fruit can be produced without Christ, only imperfectly or in a small degree.

If that is so, then we may as well preach that ungodly men who are outside Christ, under the dominion of Satan and at war with God, are nevertheless able to produce some of the fruits of spiritual life. We may declare that the enemies of Christ are capable of doing something for the glory of Christ.

But such reasoning is absurd.

I would gladly be taught how we are to answer heretics if this method of interpretation is allowed to stand.

For if nothing and not may be redefined whenever it suits us, then every passage of Scripture becomes uncertain.

Consider the possibilities:

"Without Me ye can do nothing" would mean, Without Me ye can do a little.

"The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God" would mean, There is an imperfect God.

"It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves" would mean, We partly made ourselves.

And how many other passages throughout Scripture contain the words nothing or not?

Shall we simply declare that a convenient interpretation must be applied wherever difficulties arise?

Is this really the way to clarify Scripture—to open the door to endless distortions and private inventions?

Such freedom of interpretation may be convenient for those who care little about the certainty of Scripture. But for those of us who seek to establish and strengthen consciences in the truth, nothing could be more dangerous.

Indeed, few things could be more harmful or destructive.

Listen carefully, therefore.

Unless you can prove that the word nothing not only may mean a little, but actually ought to mean a little in this passage, all your examples and arguments accomplish nothing.

You have merely fought against fire with dry straw.

I am not concerned with what might possibly be imagined. I require proof of what the text actually means.

And if such proof cannot be supplied, then I remain with the plain grammatical meaning of the words and leave your armies of arguments and your triumphs to themselves.

What has become now of that probable opinion which declared that Free Will can will no good thing?

Perhaps another convenient interpretation will now appear and tell us that nothing good really means something good.

Such grammar and logic have never before been heard of.

To make nothing mean something is to turn contradiction into truth.

Even ordinary logic will not permit it.

And what becomes, then, of the Christian doctrine that Satan is the prince of this world?

What becomes of the testimony of Christ and Paul that he rules in the hearts and minds of those who are his captives?

Shall that roaring lion, that relentless enemy of God's grace and of man's salvation, calmly allow his servants to begin doing good, even in the smallest degree, and thereby begin escaping from his tyranny?

Will he not rather drive them with all his power to oppose grace and resist God?

Consider even the case of believers. Those who are righteous, who possess the Spirit of God, and who sincerely desire to do good, struggle constantly against Satan's attacks and temptations.

If Satan wars so fiercely against those who belong to Christ, how much more does he hold firmly those who remain under his dominion?

Those who place the human will in a neutral position, free to move either toward good or evil as it pleases, overlook this entire reality.

They imagine man standing between God and Satan, belonging fully to neither kingdom.

Yet Scripture teaches no such thing.

Man is either under the rule of God or under the rule of Satan. There is no middle ground.

Therefore, if a person remains outside Christ, he cannot produce spiritual fruit in any degree. The plain meaning of Christ's words remains unchanged:

"Without Me ye can do nothing."

Section CXXVIII

What, therefore, the Diatribe cannot accomplish in its affirmative argument, I shall accomplish in the negative. Although I am not obliged to prove the negative, I shall nevertheless do so here and demonstrate by force of argument that the word nothing in this passage not only may be understood according to its natural meaning, but must be so understood. It cannot signify merely a small degree of ability, but exactly what the term itself naturally expresses.

And I shall do this in addition to that invincible argument by which

I have already gained the victory; namely, that words are always to be retained in their natural and ordinary sense unless compelling evidence proves otherwise. The Diatribe has neither done this nor is capable of doing it.

First, then, I shall make evident what the Scriptures clearly teach in many places: that Satan is the prince of this world, mighty and exceedingly subtle. As I have already shown, the human will is no longer free or independent, but is held captive under his dominion. Being the servant of sin and Satan, it can will nothing except what its master wills.

Nor would Satan permit it to will anything good. Indeed, even if Satan did not reign over man, sin itself, of which man is the slave, would sufficiently harden him so that he could not will what is good.

Moreover, the immediate context of Christ's words proves this beyond dispute, although the Diatribe dismisses it with contempt, despite the fact that I have already discussed it

Section CXXIX

Let us now consider the examples by which the Diatribe attempts to prove that the word nothing sometimes means only "a small degree." By examining these examples, we shall make it evident that the Diatribe itself is nothing and accomplishes nothing in this part of its argument. And even if it were to accomplish much, it would still achieve nothing. Such is the Diatribe in all things and in every respect.

It says:

"Generally, a man is said to do nothing when he does not achieve what he set out to accomplish. Yet, in most cases, he who attempts a thing makes some degree of progress in the attempt."

I answer: I have never heard of such a general use of the term. You have invented it by your own licence.

Words must be understood according to the subject under discussion and according to the intention of the speaker. No one calls the effort itself "nothing" merely because an attempt has been made. Rather, the term refers to the result. When a man says he has done nothing or accomplished nothing, he means that he has not achieved his objective. He has not succeeded in bringing his purpose to completion.

But even if your example were valid—which it is not—it actually supports my position rather than yours.

For this is precisely what I maintain and seek to establish: that Free-will does many things which nevertheless amount to nothing before God.

What profit is there in attempting something if the intended goal is never achieved?

Thus, whichever way the Diatribe turns, it only contradicts and refutes itself. Such is commonly the fate of those who undertake to defend a bad cause.

The same failure appears in the example it cites from Paul:

"Neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase."

— 1 Corinthians 3:7

The Diatribe says:

"That which is of the least importance and useless in itself, Paul calls nothing."

Who says this?

Do you really mean to suggest that the ministry of the Word is useless in itself and of little importance?

Paul teaches the exact opposite. Throughout his writings, and especially in 1 Corinthians 3, he highly exalts the ministry of the Word. Elsewhere he calls it the ministry of life and the ministry of glory.

Once again, you pay no attention either to the subject matter or to the intention of the speaker.

Compared with God's work of giving the increase, the planter and the waterer are indeed nothing. But as regards the work of planting and watering itself, they are certainly not nothing. Teaching, preaching, exhorting and instructing are among the greatest works performed by the Spirit of God within the Church.

This is plainly Paul's meaning, and his words make it perfectly clear.

But let us grant, for the sake of argument, that this weak example were valid. Even then, it would still support my position.

For what I maintain is this: that Free-will is nothing before God—that is, as you yourself explain it, it is useless of itself. And it is concerning what Free-will can accomplish before God that we are speaking.

As to its existence, we all know that it is something. A wicked will exists. It is a real thing. It cannot be a mere nothing.

The question is not whether the will exists, but whether it can accomplish anything that avails before God. And in that respect, it is truly nothing.

There is also that passage from 1 Corinthians 13:

"Though I have not charity, I am nothing."

Why the Diatribe introduces this as an example, I cannot understand, unless it merely wishes to swell the number of its arguments, or imagines that we possess no weapons with which to oppose it.

For the man who is without love is truly and properly nothing before God. And this is precisely what we say concerning Free-will. Therefore, this example serves our cause rather than that of the Diatribe.

Or does the Diatribe still fail to understand the point under discussion?

I am not speaking about the existence of human nature itself, but about what the schoolmen call the acceptance of grace. I readily acknowledge that Free-will, considered merely as a natural faculty, can do many things. It can eat, drink, marry, govern, reason, and perform the ordinary activities of life.

Nor need the Diatribe mock me, as though I were so foolish as to claim that Free-will cannot even sit down without Christ, while at the same time maintaining that it can do nothing but sin. Such trifling is unworthy of a serious discussion.

My position is this: man, even without the grace of God, still exists under the universal power of God's providence. God continues to move, sustain, and govern all things according to His infallible purpose. In that sense, man acts and is acted upon.

Yet all this activity is nothing before God. It has no value in His sight and is regarded as nothing but sin.

In exactly the same way, the man who is without love is called nothing in relation to grace.

Why then does the Diatribe, having admitted that we are discussing Christ and evangelical fruits—which cannot be produced apart from Him—immediately abandon the subject and begin speaking of natural actions and human achievements?

Unless it is simply to demonstrate that a man who has abandoned the truth can no longer remain consistent even with himself.

The same applies to the words of John:

"A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven."

— John 3:27

John is speaking of a man who already exists as a man, and he declares that such a man can receive nothing unless it is given from above. He is speaking of the Spirit and His gifts, not of human nature itself.

John certainly did not need the Diatribe to teach him that men already possess eyes, ears, hands, reason, understanding, and will.

Unless, perhaps, the Diatribe imagines that John the Baptist was speaking of Plato's chaos, the vacuum of Leucippus, the infinity of Aristotle, or some other philosophical nothingness which must first receive a gift from heaven before it can become something.

Is this really the way to handle Holy Scripture? Is this not merely trifling with matters of the greatest importance?

And what purpose is served by all those lengthy discussions in which the Diatribe informs us that life, deliverance from evil, the desire for good, and many other blessings come from heaven?

Who has ever denied such things?

The present discussion concerns grace. Indeed, the Diatribe itself admitted that we are speaking of Christ and evangelical fruits. Yet having admitted this, it immediately wanders off into discussions about nature, thereby obscuring the issue and confusing the reader.

Nor does it provide a single example proving what it originally promised to prove—namely, that the word nothing can legitimately mean merely a small degree.

Instead, it exposes its own confusion. It neither understands nor seems to care about the distinction between nature and grace. Even the simplest schoolmen understand this distinction and have taught it openly for centuries.

Nor does the Diatribe perceive that every example it produces supports my argument and refutes its own.

For the testimony of John establishes precisely what I have maintained all along:

"A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven."

If that is true, then Free-will is truly nothing in spiritual matters.

Thus my Achilles has conquered once again. The Diatribe has placed weapons into his hands, by which it has wounded itself, while standing defenceless and unarmed.

And so it is with all the Scriptures which, according to the Diatribe, Luther supports with such stubborn confidence. They are not overthrown by a single word. Rather, the Diatribe's own words overthrow its own

arguments.

Section CXXXI

After this, the Diatribe presents a multitude of illustrations. Yet, as usual, they accomplish nothing except distracting the unwary reader with irrelevant matters, while leaving the real issue entirely untouched.

For example:

"God indeed preserves the ship, but the mariner guides it into harbour; therefore, the mariner does not do nothing."

This illustration separates the work into two distinct actions. Preservation is attributed to God, while navigation is attributed to the sailor. If the illustration proves anything, it proves that the whole work of preservation belongs to God, and the whole work of navigation belongs to the sailor.

A fine illustration indeed!

Again:

"The husbandman gathers the harvest, but God gives the increase."

Here once more, different operations are assigned to God and to man, unless the Diatribe intends to make the farmer the creator of the crop itself.

But even if we grant that both God and man are involved, what do these illustrations actually prove? Nothing more than that creatures co-operate with God while He is at work.

But is that the question before us?

We are not discussing co-operation. We are discussing the power and operation of Free-will considered in itself.

Where, then, has this celebrated rhetorician wandered?

He began by promising to discuss one thing, and ends by discussing something entirely different. He set out to debate a pumpkin and has spent all his time talking about a gourd. The potter intended to make a noble vessel, yet somehow produces a common pitcher.

I know perfectly well that Paul co-operated with God in teaching the Corinthians. Paul preached outwardly, while God taught inwardly. Their operations were different. Likewise, when Paul spoke by the Spirit of God, he co-operated with God, although in that case the work was the same.

But what I maintain is this:

When God operates apart from the grace of His Spirit, He works all things in all men, including the ungodly. By His omnipotent power He moves, acts upon, and carries along all things that He Himself has created. None of these things can resist or alter His motion. They necessarily follow and obey according to the measure of power which He has assigned to each.

Thus even the ungodly co-operate with God.

Likewise, when God works through the Spirit of His grace in those whom He has justified—that is, within His own kingdom—He moves and governs them in the same manner. As new creatures, they follow and co-operate with Him; or rather, as Paul says, they are led by Him.

But this is not the matter presently under discussion.

We are not asking what we can do in co-operation with God. We are asking what we can do of ourselves. The question is whether man, created out of nothing, possesses any power by which he can prepare himself for the new creation of the Spirit while under the general government of God's omnipotence.

That is the point which the Diatribe ought to answer, instead of wandering off into unrelated matters.

My answer is this:

Before man was created, he did nothing and attempted nothing toward his own creation. Likewise, after he has been created, he does nothing and attempts nothing toward preserving himself in existence. Both creation and preservation are accomplished solely by the will and power of Almighty God.

Yet God does not work without us. He created and preserves us precisely so that He might work in us and through us.

The same principle applies to the new creation.

Before a man is regenerated into the kingdom of the Spirit, he does nothing and attempts nothing toward bringing about that regeneration. Likewise, after he has been regenerated, he does nothing and attempts nothing toward preserving himself in that kingdom.

The Spirit alone accomplishes both.

He regenerates us, and He preserves us after regeneration.

As James declares:

"Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."

— James 1:18

James is speaking of the renewed creation.

Yet even here God does not work without us. He created and preserves us so that He might work in us and through us. Through us He preaches, shows mercy to the poor, comforts the afflicted, and carries out His purposes in the world.

But what does all this attribute to Free-will?

Nothing.

Indeed, nothing at all.

Section CXXXII

Read, therefore, this whole portion of the Diatribe, extending over five or six pages, and you will discover that, by means of illustrations such as these, together with various beautiful passages and parables drawn from the Gospels and from Paul, it does nothing more than show us that innumerable passages may be found in the Scriptures which speak of the co-operation and assistance of God.

From these passages, however, if anyone were to draw the conclusion:

"Man can do nothing without the assisting grace of God; therefore, no works of man are good,"

the Diatribe immediately turns the argument upside down and concludes instead:

"There is nothing that man cannot do by the assisting grace of God; therefore, all the works of man can be called good."

And because there are many passages in Scripture which speak of God's assistance, it triumphantly declares:

"As many passages as there are which speak of assistance, so many there are which confirm Free-will. They are innumerable. Therefore, if the matter is to be decided by the number of testimonies, the victory is mine."

Can anyone suppose that the Diatribe was in its right senses when it wrote this?

I can scarcely attribute such reasoning either to malice or wickedness, unless indeed it intended to weary me completely by its endless digressions, continually turning aside from the very subject it professed to discuss.

But if it chooses to play the fool in a matter of such importance, then I shall not hesitate to expose its folly openly.

First of all, I neither deny nor am ignorant of the fact that all the

works of man may be good when they are performed by the assisting grace of God. Indeed, there is nothing which a man may not do when assisted by divine grace.

What astonishes me is the Diatribe's carelessness. Having set out to write concerning the power of Free-will, it ends up writing about the power of grace. More than that, it publicly asserts—as though all men were blocks of wood or stones—that Free-will is established by those very passages which magnify the grace of God.

Not only does it dare to do this, but it even crowns itself victor and triumphantly celebrates its own success.

From this very argument I learn what Free-will really is and what effect it has upon men—it makes them mad.

For what, I ask, can be speaking in this manner except Free-will itself?

But listen carefully to your own conclusions:

Scripture commends the grace of God; therefore, it proves Free-will.

Scripture exalts the assistance of grace; therefore, it establishes Free-will.

From what school of logic did you learn such reasoning?

Why not conclude the exact opposite?

Grace is preached; therefore, Free-will is shown to be nothing.

The assistance of grace is exalted; therefore, Free-will is overthrown.

For why is grace needed at all?

Is it merely so that Free-will, already possessing sufficient power of its own, may display grace as an ornamental accessory, brought out on special occasions?

Certainly not.

I therefore reverse your argument, and though I am no rhetorician, I establish a conclusion far stronger than yours:

As many passages as there are in Holy Scripture which speak of divine assistance, so many there are which abolish Free-will—and these passages are innumerable.

Therefore, if the matter is to be settled by the number of testimonies, the victory belongs to me.

For grace is necessary, and the assistance of grace is given, precisely because Free-will can accomplish nothing of itself.

Indeed, the Diatribe itself admitted this when it adopted that "probable opinion" which declares that Free-will "cannot will anything good."

Therefore, whenever grace is proclaimed and divine assistance is magnified, the impotence of Free-will is proclaimed and magnified at the very same time.

This is a conclusion so firmly established that all the powers of men, and even the gates of hell themselves, cannot overthrow it.

Section CXXXIII

Here, then, I bring to a close my defence of those passages of Scripture which the Diatribe has attempted to overthrow, lest this book become excessively large. If any matter still remains that deserves attention, it shall be addressed in the following part.

I now return to the assertions which I set forth at the beginning.

In his conclusion, Erasmus argues that if my position is true, then the countless commands, warnings, promises, threats, rewards, and punishments found throughout Scripture become meaningless. He further contends that no room remains for merit or demerit, and that the mercy and justice of God become difficult—if not impossible—to defend, if sinners are condemned by necessity. He adds that these and similar difficulties have troubled many great minds and have even driven some into complete despair.

To all of these objections I have already given a full answer.

Nor am I willing to accept that moderate compromise which Erasmus, no doubt with good intentions, recommends: namely, that we should grant some small measure of power to Free Will, in order to soften these difficulties and make the apparent contradictions of Scripture easier to reconcile.

For such moderation solves nothing.

Indeed, it gains us no advantage whatever.

Unless you attribute the whole work of salvation to Free Will—as the Pelagians openly do—the difficulties remain exactly where they were before.

The supposed contradictions in Scripture are not removed.

Merit and reward are still abolished.

The mercy and justice of God are no easier to explain.

And all the objections which men seek to avoid by granting some small and ineffective power to Free Will continue to stand untouched.

I have already demonstrated this at length.

Therefore, we must proceed consistently and without compromise.

We must deny Free Will altogether and ascribe all things to God alone.

Only then does the matter become clear.

Only then do the Scriptures speak with one voice.

Only then are the apparent contradictions resolved.

And if any difficulties remain, they must simply be endured where they cannot be fully explained.

For it is far better to confess our ignorance before God than to invent a doctrine of Free Will merely to escape difficulties that Scripture itself does not seek to remove.

The truth is not established by making divine mysteries easier for human reason to accept.

The truth is established by submitting ourselves to the testimony of God.

Therefore, let all things be attributed to God.

Let Free Will be abandoned.

And let the Scriptures stand as they are, without alteration, compromise, or human invention.

Section CXXXIV

My dear Erasmus, I must also protest against the suggestion that I have argued contrary to my true convictions, or that I have been carried away by excessive zeal beyond the limits of my own principles.

I will not allow it to be implied that I am so dishonest as to write one thing while secretly believing another.

Nor can it be said that I have been driven by the heat of controversy to attack Free Will more fiercely than I ought.

I am fully persuaded that you will find no inconsistency in my writings.

These are not opinions hastily adopted for the sake of argument.

They are convictions which I have openly maintained for many years and continue to maintain to this day.

I have consistently asserted that there is no such thing as Free Will in the sense in which it is commonly understood.

It is, as I have often stated, nothing more than an empty term without any corresponding reality.

What I have written here, I have written because I believe it to be true.

I have not been compelled by controversy to invent these arguments.

Rather, I have been compelled by the truth itself to defend them when challenged.

As for the charge that I conduct theological disputes with excessive force and severity, I freely acknowledge that I have spoken strongly.

If this be considered a fault, then it is a fault of which I am not ashamed.

Indeed, I rejoice that such a testimony is borne concerning me in the cause of God.

May God Himself confirm that testimony on the Last Day.

For I would far rather be accused of too much zeal in defending the truth than of coldness, indifference, or deceitfulness in the work of the Lord.

The words of the prophet continually ring in my ears:

"Cursed be he that doeth the work of the LORD deceitfully." (Jeremiah 48:10)

If at times I have appeared severe toward you, Erasmus, it has not proceeded from hatred or malice.

It has arisen from a sincere concern that the weight and importance of this subject might awaken your attention.

For you are a man of exceptional gifts and learning.

Yet in this matter, I believe you have greatly erred.

Nor can it be denied that you yourself have not always written with perfect calmness.

Though your style is generally polished and restrained, there are places in this very book where your words become sharp and cutting.

At times you hurl your arguments with considerable force.

Indeed, were a reader less attentive and discerning, he might easily conclude that you were writing with anger rather than moderation.

But these personal matters contribute nothing to the question before us.

We are both men, subject to human weakness and infirmity.

Therefore, let us willingly forgive one another in these things and return to the issue itself.

The Sovereignty of grace defended

We now come to the final part of this discussion.

Here, as I promised at the outset, I shall advance my own arguments directly against Free Will.

Yet I do not intend to bring forward every argument that could be made.

Who could possibly do so within the limits of a single book?

The whole of Scripture stands on this side of the question.

Every letter and every word bears witness to the truth I have been defending.

Nor is there any need to multiply arguments without end.

Free Will already lies defeated.

It has been overthrown in two decisive ways.

First, I have shown that the passages which Erasmus gathered in support of Free Will actually testify against it.

Second, I have demonstrated that the Scriptures which the Diatribe attempted to weaken remain firm, clear, and invincible.

Had the first argument not been sufficient, the second would have been enough.

Had the second been lacking, the first alone would have secured the victory.

Why then should I continue striking an enemy who has already fallen?

Why should I heap weapon upon weapon against a position that has already been thoroughly overthrown?

Nevertheless, because the importance of the subject demands it, and because the truth deserves a full hearing, I shall now proceed to establish positively the doctrine that I have thus far defended chiefly by way of refutation.

The battle is already won.

What remains is to display more fully the strength of that truth by which the victory has been secured.

Moreover, in this part I shall be as brief as the subject permits. Out of the countless testimonies of Scripture that could be brought forward, I shall select only two principal champions, together with a few of their supporting forces.

These two great witnesses are Paul and John the Evangelist.

From their writings alone, the doctrine of the bondage of the will may be established beyond all contradiction. For they speak with such clarity and authority on these matters that, if their testimony be received, little else need be added.

Therefore, rather than burdening the reader with an endless multitude of passages, I shall allow these two mighty witnesses to speak for themselves.

Their testimony will be sufficient to overthrow every confidence in Free Will and to establish the sovereign grace of God.

Section CXXXV

"The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness." (Romans 1:18)

Consider carefully the force of this statement.

Paul pronounces a universal sentence upon mankind.

He declares that all men stand under the wrath of God.

And what does this imply, except that all men deserve wrath and condemnation?

For he immediately assigns the reason why God's wrath rests upon them: they are ungodly, unrighteous, and suppress the truth by their unrighteousness.

Where now is the power of Free Will that is supposed to strive after good?

Paul attributes to it no such power.

Instead, he places it under the wrath of God and declares it to be ungodly and unrighteous.

That which deserves wrath cannot at the same time be deserving of grace.

That which is ungodly does not strive towards grace but stands in need of grace.

Some, however, will object and accuse me of misunderstanding Paul.

They will say that Paul is not speaking of all men universally, but only of those particular men who are ungodly and unrighteous and who hold the truth in unrighteousness. Therefore, they argue, it does not follow that every individual is included under this condemnation.

To this I reply that Paul's entire argument proves the opposite.

The Apostle is speaking universally.

He is describing the whole human race as it stands before God.

Indeed, the expression "who hold the truth in unrighteousness" functions as a description of mankind in general.

It is not intended to distinguish one group of men from another, but to reveal the true condition of all men by nature.

The whole flow of Paul's argument demands this interpretation.

For immediately before these words he has declared:

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." (Romans 1:16)

Why, we must ask, is the Gospel necessary?

Why is the power of God unto salvation required?

Why must both Jew and Greek be saved through it?

The answer is plain.

Because all alike stand under the wrath of God.

If they were not under wrath, they would have no need of salvation.

If they possessed within themselves the power to attain righteousness, the Gospel would be unnecessary.

But Paul teaches the exact opposite.

The Gospel is necessary precisely because mankind is helpless.

The power of God is required because man has no power of his own.

The grace of God is necessary because human righteousness is altogether insufficient.

Who then can be exempted from this universal condemnation?

Paul mentions both Jew and Greek because they represented the most privileged and enlightened portions of humanity.

The Jews possessed the Law.

The Greeks possessed learning, wisdom, and philosophy.

Yet Paul places both under the same sentence.

Both alike stand condemned.

Both alike are destitute of righteousness.

Both alike require the saving power of God.

And if the most favoured nations on earth are included under this judgment, who can possibly be excluded?

Shall we suppose that among these Jews and Greeks there were no men striving with all the powers of Free Will after what was good?

Certainly there were many who appeared outwardly moral, religious,

and sincere.

Yet Paul makes no distinction.

He includes them all under wrath.

He declares them all ungodly and unrighteous by nature.

And what Paul says concerning Jews and Greeks, the other Apostles declare concerning all nations.

Everywhere the same verdict is pronounced.

The whole world stands guilty before God.

All are shut up under sin.

All are in need of grace.

Therefore, the first witness whom I have called into this discussion—Paul himself—opens his testimony by striking directly at the very root of Free Will.

For if all men stand under wrath, and if all alike are unrighteous and helpless before God, then there remains no room for the imagined power of the will to begin its own salvation.

The Gospel does not come to assist men who are already moving toward God.

It comes to rescue those who are lost.

And this is the foundation upon which the whole of Paul's argument rests.

Section CXXXVI

This testimony of Paul therefore stands firm and unshaken against Free Will.

Indeed, it strikes at Free Will in its highest and most favourable form.

For if even the most privileged and exalted of men—those who possessed the Law, wisdom, learning, morality, and every outward advantage—are nevertheless declared ungodly, unrighteous, and under the wrath of God, then what becomes of the supposed power of Free Will?

If Paul's argument is valid, Free Will cannot stand.

And if Paul's argument is not valid, then his whole reasoning collapses.

For he allows no middle ground.

He divides mankind into two classes only.

Those who believe the Gospel are under salvation.

Those who do not believe are under the wrath of God.

The believing are counted righteous.

The unbelieving remain ungodly, unrighteous, and condemned.

Such is the force of his argument.

Paul's meaning is clear.

The righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel and is received by faith.

But why should God reveal this righteousness if men already possessed it within themselves?

Why should He make known a righteousness from heaven if human nature already contained either righteousness itself or even the seeds of it?

To suppose such a thing would be to accuse God of acting without wisdom.

Yet God does nothing in vain.

Therefore, the very revelation of the righteousness of God proves that mankind does not possess it by nature.

Indeed, it proves something more.

It demonstrates that even the most distinguished and enlightened among men neither possess righteousness nor understand it.

For if they already knew the righteousness of God, there would be no need for it to be revealed.

The revelation itself presupposes ignorance.

And ignorance of righteousness is the condition in which Paul finds the whole human race.

Nor can anyone escape this conclusion by claiming that the righteousness of God is revealed only to the lowest and most ignorant classes of society.

Paul expressly rejects such a notion.

He declares himself a debtor both to Jews and Greeks, to the wise and the unwise, to the cultured and the uncultured alike.

The Gospel is necessary for all.

The revelation of righteousness is necessary for all.

Therefore, ignorance of righteousness belongs to all.

Paul gathers the whole race together into one great mass and pronounces the same verdict upon all.

All are unrighteous.

All are ignorant of the righteousness that comes by faith.

All stand in need of the Gospel.

So far, then, is mankind from being able to will or accomplish spiritual good, that it does not even know what true righteousness is.

And this conclusion is strengthened further by the very nature of the Gospel itself.

The Gospel is revealed to those who sit in darkness.

It is proclaimed to those who are ignorant.

It is announced to those who do not possess the knowledge it contains.

For revelation always implies that something was previously unknown.

If men already possessed the righteousness of God within themselves, there would be nothing to reveal.

But because they do not know it, God reveals it from heaven.

And if men are ignorant of the righteousness that saves, they must necessarily remain under wrath and condemnation.

Nor can they deliver themselves from that condition.

For how can a man seek what he does not know?

How can he pursue a righteousness of which he is ignorant?

How can he strive after a salvation whose nature he does not understand?

Before any endeavour can begin, there must first be knowledge of the object sought.

Yet Paul teaches that mankind lacks even this knowledge.

Therefore, not only is man unable to attain righteousness by his own power, he does not even know what righteousness is.

The blindness is complete.

The inability is total.

And thus Paul's argument leaves no room whatsoever for the imagined powers of Free Will.

The righteousness that saves must come from God.

It must be revealed by God.

It must be received through faith.

For fallen man neither possesses it, understands it, nor seeks after it by nature.

Section CXXXVII

This conclusion is confirmed not only by Scripture, but also by experience itself.

Discussion Part Three

Let any man point to a single individual from the whole history of mankind—however holy, wise, or righteous he may appear—into whose mind it ever entered that the way of salvation was this:

To believe in Jesus Christ, who is both God and man; who died for the sins of the world; who rose again from the dead; and who now sits at the right hand of the Father, making intercession for His people and reconciling them to God.

Where, I ask, did human reason ever discover such a doctrine?

What philosopher ever imagined it?

What sage ever taught it?

What nation ever arrived at it by the powers of nature?

Consider the greatest philosophers the world has produced.

What were their thoughts concerning God?

What did they know of His righteousness?

What did they teach concerning His wrath against sin?

Search their writings from beginning to end and you will find no trace of this Gospel.

Human wisdom never discovered it.

Human reason never conceived it.

The greatest minds of the world remained entirely ignorant of it.

Consider next the Jews.

They possessed advantages far greater than the Gentiles.

They received the Law.

They witnessed mighty miracles.

They were instructed by prophets sent from God generation after generation.

Yet what was their response when the righteousness of God was finally revealed in Christ?

Did they embrace it?

Did they recognise it?

Did they rejoice in it?

On the contrary, they rejected it.

More than that, they hated it.

Indeed, no people under heaven opposed Christ with greater determination.

And they continue in that opposition to this day.

Yet who would dare to suggest that among so great a nation there were none who exercised the powers of Free Will?

Surely many among them devoted themselves to religion with remarkable zeal.

Surely many strove with all their strength after what they believed to be righteousness.

Yet what was the result?

The very people most earnest in their efforts became the fiercest enemies of the righteousness revealed by God.

The most excellent among them not only failed to discover this way of salvation, but actively opposed it.

When it was preached, they rejected it.

When it was revealed, they hated it.

When it appeared before them in the person of Christ, they sought to destroy it.

This is precisely why Paul declares:

"But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness." (1 Corinthians 1:23)

Observe the force of these words.

The Gospel was not merely unknown to Jews and Gentiles.

It was offensive to them.

The Jews stumbled over it.

The Greeks mocked it.

One rejected it as scandalous.

The other dismissed it as absurd.

Since Paul speaks here of both Jews and Greeks, he embraces under one description the principal nations of the world.

And if both alike regarded the righteousness of God as either an offence or foolishness, what becomes of Free Will?

What becomes of its supposed desire for good?

What becomes of its supposed efforts towards righteousness?

The evidence points in the opposite direction.

Far from seeking righteousness, Free Will opposes it.

Far from embracing the grace of God, it wages war against it.

For it is impossible to imagine that among all those Jews and Greeks there were none who exerted themselves with all the powers of nature and reason.

Yet all their striving led them not toward Christ but away from Him.

Their efforts did not assist grace; they resisted grace.

Their endeavours did not prepare them for salvation; they armed

them against it.

Tell me then, what good can Free Will possibly seek, if the righteousness of God itself is a stumblingblock and foolishness to it?

How can it move toward salvation when salvation is the very thing it despises?

Nor can anyone escape the force of Paul's words by saying that he speaks only of some Jews and some Gentiles.

The Apostle makes no such distinction.

He divides mankind into two classes only.

There are those who perish, to whom the Gospel is foolishness.

And there are those who are called, to whom Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

No middle ground exists.

No third category is allowed.

Paul separates believers from unbelievers by a clear and decisive line.

Those who are called by God believe.

Those who are not called reject the Gospel.

And since we are speaking of men apart from grace, Paul's verdict is unmistakable.

The righteousness of God is foolishness to them.

They reject it.

They despise it.

They oppose it.

And this, we are told, is the noble striving of Free Will toward good.

Section CXXXVIII

Paul does not stop with the Gentiles. He proceeds to examine the very best that human wisdom can produce and pronounces judgment upon it.

Speaking of the Greeks, he declares that:

"They became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools." (Romans 1:21–22)

Consider carefully what Paul is condemning.

He is not speaking of the ignorant masses.

He is speaking of the wise.

He is speaking of philosophers, scholars, and thinkers.

He is speaking of those whom the world regarded as the highest

examples of human wisdom.

And what does he say concerning them?

Their imaginations became vain.

Their hearts were darkened.

Their wisdom became foolishness.

The very faculty upon which they most relied became the instrument of their downfall.

For these "imaginations" include the highest thoughts, reflections, and speculations of human reason.

They represent the noblest achievements of the natural mind.

Yet Paul calls them vanity.

Indeed, he calls them foolishness.

And what was the result of all their efforts?

Did they draw nearer to God?

Did they discover the righteousness of faith?

Did they attain salvation?

Quite the reverse.

The more they trusted in their own wisdom, the further they wandered from the truth.

At length they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for idols and gave themselves over to every kind of corruption and wickedness, as Paul proceeds to describe in detail.

If then the highest achievements of the wisest nation on earth are condemned as vanity and ungodliness, what shall we say of the rest of mankind?

If the most devoted efforts of the most gifted men are evil, what hope remains for those whose abilities are far less?

Paul makes no distinction.

He condemns the entire system of human wisdom.

He does not merely reject some abuses of reason; he exposes the bankruptcy of all attempts to attain righteousness through human powers.

And if he condemns the works, he necessarily condemns the power from which those works proceed.

If the fruit is evil, the tree cannot be good.

If the highest endeavours of human wisdom are corrupt, then the Free Will which produces them cannot be righteous.

The same argument applies to the Jews.

Paul rejects all confidence in outward privilege and external religion.

He declares:

"For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly." (Romans 2:28)

And again:

"But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly." (Romans 2:29)

Nothing could be clearer than this distinction.

The outward Jew, however religious he may appear, is not thereby accepted before God.

The true Jew is one whose heart has been changed by the Spirit.

Now consider how many Jews there must have been who possessed every outward advantage.

Many were devout.

Many were zealous.

Many were highly respected.

Many sincerely sought righteousness according to the Law.

The Apostle himself bears witness to their zeal.

Elsewhere he says that they had:

"A zeal of God, but not according to knowledge." (Romans 10:2)

They followed after righteousness.

They laboured diligently in the service of God.

Some lived outwardly blameless lives.

Yet what was Paul's verdict?

They remained transgressors.

They remained outside the righteousness of God.

For though they possessed zeal, they lacked faith.

Though they pursued righteousness, they sought it in the wrong way.

Though they laboured earnestly, they rejected the righteousness that comes through Christ.

Indeed, they became some of its fiercest opponents.

What conclusion then can be drawn?

It is this:

Free Will is never more dangerous than when it appears at its best.

When man trusts in his own wisdom, his own efforts, his own religion, and his own righteousness, he is furthest from the grace of God.

The more earnestly Free Will strives apart from grace, the more deeply it entangles itself in error.

The greater its efforts, the greater its failure.

The stronger its confidence, the further it falls from the truth.

The words of the Apostle leave no room for any other conclusion.

The distinction is clear.

The verdict is certain.

And the testimony of Scripture stands unshaken.

The highest powers of man do not lead him toward God.

Left to themselves, they lead him away from God.

Therefore, Free Will, even at its very best, cannot produce righteousness.

Indeed, the more it relies upon itself, the more completely it opposes the righteousness that comes from faith alone.

Section CXXXIX

But let us allow Paul to interpret his own meaning.

In the third chapter of Romans, after gathering together all that he has previously established, he arrives at this conclusion:

"What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin." (Romans 3:9)

What becomes of Free Will now?

Paul declares that both Jews and Gentiles are all under sin.

Not some of them.

Not the worst of them.

Not merely those who have given themselves over to vice.

But all.

The statement is clear, direct, and universal.

No obscure language hides its meaning.

No difficult interpretation is required.

No ingenuity of man can evade its force.

When Paul says "all," he excludes none.

And when he says that all are "under sin," he means that all are subject to the dominion and power of sin.

Those who are under sin are not free from sin.

They are its servants and captives.

Therefore, no degree of spiritual freedom remains to them.

But upon what basis does Paul make so sweeping a declaration?

Where has he proved that both Jews and Gentiles are under sin?

He has already done so in the earlier chapters.

He has shown that:

"The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." (Romans 1:18)

This universal condemnation he then confirms by experience.

He points to the actual lives of men.

He demonstrates that, being alienated from God, they were given over to various sins and corruptions.

Their actions reveal the condition of their hearts.

Their conduct proves the truth of God's judgment.

The fruits show the nature of the tree.

And what do those fruits reveal?

They reveal that men, left to themselves, will and do nothing but evil.

The same argument is then applied to the Jews.

Paul strips them of every ground of confidence.

He exposes the emptiness of their outward privileges and religious observances.

For he declares that the Jew who possesses only the outward letter of the Law is himself a transgressor of that very Law.

And how does he prove it?

Again, by experience.

Again, by the evidence of their own conduct.

He asks:

"Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal?" (Romans 2:21)

And again:

"Thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege?" (Romans 2:22)

Thus Paul demonstrates that even those who boast in the Law fail to keep it.

Their profession condemns them.

Their lives expose them.

Their privileges do not save them.

Their outward religion cannot justify them.

Indeed, Paul excludes no one from this verdict except those who are Jews inwardly—that is, those whose hearts have been renewed by the Spirit of God.

All others remain under the same condemnation.

Whether Jew or Gentile, learned or ignorant, moral or immoral, religious or irreligious, the sentence remains unchanged:

All are under sin.

And if all are under sin, what room remains for Free Will?

If all are captives, who is free?

If all are servants of sin, who possesses the power to choose righteousness?

Paul's conclusion leaves no place for such a doctrine.

The whole human race is gathered together beneath one verdict.

All are guilty.

All are condemned.

All are powerless to deliver themselves.

And therefore all alike stand in need of the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

This is the Apostle's conclusion.

And it is a conclusion against which Free Will has no answer.

Section CXL

But let us now see how Paul proves his case from the Holy Scriptures themselves.

And let us ask whether the passages he cites carry any less force in their original setting than they do when employed by the Apostle.

Paul writes:

"As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." (Romans 3:10–12)

Let anyone who can now produce his convenient interpretations.

Let him invent figures of speech.

Let him claim that the words are obscure or ambiguous.

Let him defend Free Will against these declarations if he is able.

If anyone can overthrow the force of these words, I am prepared to surrender the argument altogether.

I will retract everything I have written and become a defender of Free Will myself.

For these words are perfectly clear.

They apply to all mankind.

Discussion Part Three

The Psalm from which Paul quotes introduces God Himself looking down from heaven upon the children of men and pronouncing judgment upon them:

"The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God." (Psalm 14:2)

And what was the result of that divine inspection?

"They are all gone aside."

Not some.

Not many.

But all.

Lest the Jews imagine that these words applied only to the Gentiles, Paul removes every possibility of escape.

He expressly declares:

"Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law." (Romans 3:19)

Thus the Jews themselves are included.

Indeed, they are included particularly.

This is entirely consistent with Paul's declaration that the Gospel is preached "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."

Therefore both Jews and Gentiles stand together beneath the same verdict.

Hear then the judgment of God.

All the children of men.

All who are under the Law.

All Jews and all Gentiles.

All alike are declared unrighteous before God.

None understands.

None seeks after God.

All have turned aside.

All have become unprofitable.

Such is the testimony of Scripture.

And among this universal company must surely be included those whom the world regards as the best and most admirable.

Among them are the moral, the religious, the disciplined, and the sincere.

Among them are those whom the Diatribe praises as possessing noble faculties and seeds of goodness within themselves.

Unless, indeed, someone wishes to argue that these people are not

among the "children of men" at all.

How then can Free Will strive after good if all men are ignorant of God and refuse to seek Him?

How can there be a natural power to attain righteousness if all alike have turned aside from the path of righteousness?

How can there be an innate inclination toward God when Scripture declares that none seeks after Him?

The language could hardly be plainer.

These words teach that mankind is ignorant of God, indifferent toward God, and hostile to God.

Men do not merely fail to find Him; they do not seek Him.

They do not merely lack righteousness; they turn away from it.

And this ignorance and rebellion are not confined to the lower passions and baser appetites.

They belong especially to the highest and noblest faculties of man.

For where ought the knowledge of God to reside if not in the understanding?

Where ought reverence for God to dwell if not in the will?

Yet Scripture declares both faculties corrupt.

The understanding does not know God.

The will does not seek God.

Reason is blind.

The will is perverse.

Thus the very powers in which men place their confidence are exposed as fallen and incapable.

What is it to be unrighteous except for the will itself to be without righteousness?

What is it to fail in understanding except for the mind itself to be darkened?

What is it to be ignorant of God except for reason to be blind concerning the things of God?

What is it to turn aside except for the whole man to depart from the right way?

What is it to become unprofitable except to be unable to produce any spiritual good?

And what is it not to fear God except to despise His Word, His works, His commandments, His promises, and His will?

If these things are true—and Scripture declares them plainly—what

can human reason discover that is right?

What can the will choose that is good?

If the understanding is blind, what can it direct the will toward except error?

And if the will is hostile to God, what can it pursue except evil?

When reason wanders in darkness and the will turns away from righteousness, what remains in man by which he may attain spiritual good?

Nothing.

For both the understanding and the will—the highest faculties of human nature—stand condemned by the judgment of God.

Section CXLI

But perhaps someone will object that, although the will has gone astray and reason is ignorant of God, this does not entirely destroy Free Will.

It may be argued that while man cannot achieve righteousness by his own powers, he can nevertheless make some attempt towards it. Likewise, reason may be able to attain some measure of knowledge, even if it cannot reach perfection.

After all, we often attempt things which we fail to accomplish. Therefore, the question concerns the existence of a power, not the successful completion of an act.

To this I reply that the words of the prophet overthrow both the act and the power itself.

When Scripture declares that no man seeks after God, it means not only that no man successfully finds Him, but that no man even begins to seek Him.

For if there existed within man any power or ability to will what is spiritually good, that power could not remain inactive.

As I have already shown, God does not permit the faculties He has created to lie dormant. Whatever power exists is moved into action by His providence.

Therefore, if such a power existed in man, it would inevitably reveal itself somewhere. There would be some example of a person seeking after God, however imperfectly.

But God Himself looks down from heaven and finds none.

Not one seeks after Him.

Not one attempts to seek Him.

Not one begins the journey.

Therefore, the conclusion is unavoidable.

The supposed power does not exist.

All have gone out of the way.

Moreover, if Paul is not understood to speak of inability as well as actual sinfulness, his whole argument collapses.

For Paul's purpose throughout Romans is to demonstrate the absolute necessity of grace.

If men could make even the smallest beginning by their own powers, grace would not be necessary in the fullest sense.

It might assist what man had already begun, but it would not be indispensable.

Yet Paul argues the very opposite.

Grace is necessary precisely because man cannot begin.

He cannot take the first step.

He cannot make the slightest movement towards God apart from divine intervention.

Thus this passage utterly abolishes Free Will.

Nothing spiritually good remains in man by nature.

Scripture describes him as unrighteous, ignorant of God, a despiser of God, alienated from God, and unprofitable in His sight.

The words of the prophet are therefore decisive, both in their original setting and in Paul's use of them.

Nor is it a small matter when man is described as ignorant of God and as despising God.

These are the fountain-heads of all iniquity.

They are the source of every sin and the root of every evil.

For what wickedness can exist where ignorance of God and contempt for God are absent?

Indeed, the whole kingdom of Satan within man could scarcely be described in fewer words or in words more expressive than these:

Man is ignorant of God and despises God.

Within those words are contained unbelief, disobedience, sacrilege, blasphemy, cruelty, hardness of heart, lack of mercy toward neighbour, and the love of self above all things.

Here, says Luther, is the true glory and power of Free Will.

Far from being a noble faculty capable of leading man toward God, it is revealed by Scripture to be blind, corrupt, hostile to its Creator, and utterly dependent upon divine grace.

And if the highest faculties are corrupt, what hope can there be in the lower?

Therefore the testimony of Scripture leaves no room for confidence in Free Will.

Man does not merely need assistance.

He needs renewal.

He does not merely need instruction.

He needs illumination.

He does not merely need encouragement.

He needs a new heart.

And all of this must come from God alone.

Section CXLII

Paul continues his argument and now speaks in the clearest possible terms concerning all mankind, and especially concerning those who are regarded as the best and most upright among men.

He writes:

"That every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God." (Romans 3:19)

And again:

"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight." (Romans 3:20)

Consider the force of these words.

How can every mouth be stopped if some power still remains within man by which he may do spiritual good?

If Free Will retains any genuine ability, however small, a man might still reply:

"There is something within me that cannot be condemned. There remains a power which God Himself has given, and by that power I can contribute something toward my salvation."

Such a mouth would not be stopped.

Such a person could not be said to stand wholly guilty before God.

For if there exists within man any sound and uncorrupted power, then the statement that the whole world is guilty before God cannot be

universally true.

That power would stand as an exception.

And if it stands as an exception, then Paul's words cease to be absolute.

But Paul allows no exception.

If every mouth is stopped, then every mouth is stopped.

If the whole world is guilty, then the whole world is guilty.

And if all are guilty before God, then all alike are unrighteous, ungodly, and deserving of judgment.

Let those who defend Free Will explain how any part of man can escape this universal condemnation.

How can a power remain innocent when the whole world is declared guilty?

How can a faculty remain righteous when all are pronounced unrighteous?

The language of the Apostle leaves no room for such distinctions.

His words descend like thunderbolts upon the entire human race.

There is none righteous.

There is none that understands.

There is none that seeks after God.

All have turned aside.

All have become unprofitable.

Such declarations strike not merely one part of man, but the whole man.

They condemn the entire race without exception.

Indeed, if men truly grasped the force of these words, they would tremble before them.

For here God pronounces judgment not merely upon outward actions, but upon the very condition of mankind itself.

Yet such is the blindness of human nature that men continue to search for some corner in which Free Will may hide.

They seek some small refuge from the verdict of God.

But the Apostle leaves none.

The same truth is reinforced when he declares:

"By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight."

Notice the expression: no flesh.

Paul does not say that certain sinners are not justified.

Nor does he speak merely of the openly wicked.

He chooses the broadest and most comprehensive term possible.

No flesh.

By this expression he includes every person and everything in man that might appear excellent, noble, religious, or worthy.

Had he spoken only of the common people, some might imagine that the learned, the devout, or the morally disciplined were exempt.

Had he spoken only of notorious sinners, some might suppose that the religious and respectable were excluded from the judgment.

But Paul condemns all alike.

He declares that no flesh shall be justified.

This includes those who devoted themselves most diligently to the Law.

It includes those who strove after righteousness with the greatest sincerity.

It includes those who exercised all the powers of reason and will in pursuit of religious obedience.

Indeed, it includes the very people whom men would naturally regard as the most righteous.

If such men are not justified by the works of the Law, then the Law itself cannot provide righteousness.

And if the Law cannot justify, then those who trust in it remain under condemnation.

Whether they labour with great zeal or little zeal makes no difference.

Whether they devote themselves earnestly or carelessly to its observance changes nothing.

The works of the Law cannot justify.

And what cannot justify leaves the worker still guilty before God.

Therefore all who rest upon their own obedience remain ungodly in His sight.

And if they remain ungodly, they remain sinners.

The conclusion is unavoidable.

All mankind stands condemned before God.

No work of man can remove that condemnation.

No effort of reason or will can overcome it.

And therefore salvation must come entirely from outside of man—from the grace of God alone.

Such is Paul's argument.

And such is the verdict that leaves no refuge for Free Will.

Many seek to evade Paul's argument by claiming that when he speaks of "the works of the law," he refers only to the ceremonial ordinances of the Jewish religion. According to this view, circumcision, sacrifices, feast days, and similar observances were abolished by the death of Christ and therefore cannot justify.

To this I reply that such an interpretation arose from a serious error, commonly attributed to Jerome. Although Augustine vigorously opposed it, the error nevertheless spread widely throughout the Church and has continued to the present day. Its effects have been disastrous.

For once this interpretation is accepted, Paul can scarcely be understood at all, and the knowledge of Christ becomes obscured.

Indeed, if no other error had entered the Church, this one alone would have been sufficient to inflict great harm upon the Gospel.

For if Paul is speaking only of ceremonial works, how does his argument prove that all men are unrighteous and in need of grace?

Someone may answer:

"Very well, ceremonial works do not justify. But perhaps moral works, such as obedience to the Ten Commandments, do justify."

Yet by saying this, you have destroyed Paul's argument altogether.

For if moral obedience can justify, then grace is no longer necessary.

At most, grace would merely free us from ceremonial observances while leaving righteousness to be attained through our own efforts.

But this is not Paul's teaching.

Paul argues that all men are under sin and under the wrath of God. Therefore he excludes justification by every kind of work performed by man.

Nor is it true that ceremonial works became unlawful after the death of Christ.

Paul never says this.

His argument is not that such works are evil in themselves, but that they cannot justify.

There is a great difference between saying that a thing is unlawful and saying that it cannot make a man righteous before God.

Eating and drinking do not justify a man, yet they are not unlawful.

Likewise, many ceremonial actions may be performed without sin, but they do not justify.

Discussion Part Three

The issue throughout Paul's argument is not whether certain actions may be performed, but whether they can make a sinner righteous before God.

And Paul's answer is clear: they cannot.

Furthermore, ceremonial works were commanded by the Law, just as moral works were commanded by the Law.

Both therefore belong to what Paul calls "the works of the law."

Since Paul is writing principally to Jews, no one should doubt that he is referring to everything contained in the Law, not merely one portion of it.

Indeed, if the ceremonial law had ceased entirely to be law, Paul could hardly have called its observances "works of the law."

A law that no longer exists cannot properly be described as law.

Yet Paul continues to use this expression because he is speaking of the Law as a whole, standing with all its authority and demands before the conscience of man.

Let Paul interpret himself.

Writing to the Galatians, he declares:

"As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse." (Galatians 3:10)

He then supports his argument by quoting Moses:

"Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them."

Notice carefully what Paul is doing.

Whenever he speaks of the works of the law, he refers to everything written in the book of the law.

He does not divide the commandments into ceremonial and moral categories.

He speaks comprehensively.

Moreover, Moses pronounces a curse upon those who fail to continue in all things written in the Law, while Paul pronounces a curse upon those who rely upon the works of the Law.

At first glance these statements may appear different, but in reality they teach the same truth.

For those who rely upon their own works inevitably fail to fulfil the Law perfectly.

The reason is simple.

The Law can only be fulfilled through the Spirit of God.

Without the Spirit, men may strive, labour, and exert themselves with all their strength, yet they cannot achieve true obedience.

Thus Moses and Paul stand in complete agreement.

Moses says that those who fail to continue in all things written in the Law are cursed.

Paul says that those who rely upon the works of the Law are cursed.

Both statements are true because both describe people who lack the Spirit of God.

Without the Spirit, the works of the Law—however numerous, sincere, or impressive—cannot justify.

And where there is no justification, there remains only condemnation.

Therefore the most devoted observer of the Law stands in exactly the same need of grace as the most obvious sinner.

For righteousness comes not through works, but through the Spirit of God working through faith.

Section CXLIV

In a word, Paul's whole argument confirms the position that I have maintained throughout this discussion.

He divides all who seek righteousness by works into two classes only: those who possess the Spirit and those who do not.

He leaves no middle ground between them.

Thus he declares:

"By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified."

What does this mean except that those who perform the works of the Law without the Spirit gain no benefit from them in the sight of God?

They remain flesh.

And to be flesh is to remain unrighteous, ignorant of God, and alienated from Him.

Paul makes the same distinction elsewhere.

In Galatians he asks:

"Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?"

Again he says:

"But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested."

And again:

"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the

deeds of the law."

From all these passages it is clear that Paul sets the Spirit in opposition to the works of the Law, and indeed in opposition to everything that belongs merely to human nature.

All the powers of the flesh, however noble they may appear, are excluded.

The meaning is therefore the same as that expressed by Christ:

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh." (John 3:6)

Whatever is not born of the Spirit remains flesh, no matter how impressive, religious, or outwardly righteous it may appear.

Even the most excellent works commanded by the Law of God remain flesh if they are performed without the Spirit of Christ.

And what is flesh cannot justify.

Indeed, apart from the Spirit, even the best works of men remain under condemnation.

Let this therefore be regarded as settled:

When Paul speaks of the works of the Law, he is speaking not merely of ceremonial observances but of the entire Law.

And if he condemns all works performed without the Spirit, then he necessarily condemns everything that proceeds from Free Will.

For that is precisely the matter under dispute.

The highest condition to which man can attain by his own powers is to devote himself to the Law of God.

Nothing more exalted can be imagined.

Yet Paul declares that even those who are most devoted to the Law are not justified.

Notice carefully that he does not speak merely of open sinners or those who despise God's commandments.

He speaks of those who are "of the works of the law."

That is, those who strive most diligently to obey it.

Those who labour most earnestly after righteousness.

Those who exercise all the powers of reason and will in the service of God.

Those who are assisted by the Law itself, instructed by it, and stirred up by its commands.

If such people are not justified, what hope remains for those who possess only Free Will without even the guidance of the Law?

If Free Will, strengthened by the Law and exerting all its powers in

obedience to the Law, cannot attain righteousness, what can it accomplish when left entirely to itself?

Paul answers this question when he says:

"By the law is the knowledge of sin."

Here he shows the true purpose of the Law.

The Law does not give righteousness.

It reveals sin.

It teaches man what sin is.

Indeed, Free Will is so blind that it cannot even recognise sin without being instructed by the Law.

And if a man does not know what sin is, how can he possibly remove it?

How can he fight an enemy he cannot identify?

How can he seek a cure for a disease he does not recognise?

All that remains is confusion.

He calls good evil and evil good.

He mistakes righteousness for sin and sin for righteousness.

And experience confirms this every day.

Who are the fiercest enemies of the righteousness revealed in the Gospel?

Often they are those whom the world regards as the most religious, the most learned, and the most devoted to righteousness.

They condemn the truth as heresy.

They persecute the Gospel as error.

They boast in their own traditions and inventions while rejecting the righteousness that comes from God.

Thus Paul silences Free Will completely.

For if the Law itself must first reveal sin to man, then man was previously ignorant of it.

And if he is ignorant of sin, how can he possess any power to seek true righteousness?

Far from possessing such a power, he cannot even recognise his own condition until God reveals it to him.

Therefore Free Will contributes nothing toward salvation.

Its blindness is exposed by the Law.

Its impotence is revealed by the Gospel.

And its need of divine grace is established beyond all contradiction.

"If we can do nothing, why are there so many laws, so many commandments, so many threatenings, and so many promises?"

Paul gives a very different answer from that which human reason and Free Will would naturally expect.

He says:

"By the law is the knowledge of sin."

He does not say that the Law was given to assist Free Will in attaining righteousness.

He does not say that the Law co-operates with man in producing merit before God.

Rather, he declares that the purpose of the Law is to reveal sin.

Its office is to enlighten those who are blind and ignorant.

It acts as a light which exposes disease, uncovers sin, reveals evil, and makes known death, hell, and the wrath of God.

Yet while it reveals these things, it does not remove them.

It diagnoses the disease but does not provide the cure.

When a man is brought by the Law to recognise his true condition, he is humbled.

He is troubled.

He is cast down.

Indeed, he may even be driven to despair of himself.

The Law does not heal him, nor can he heal himself.

Another light is needed—one that reveals the remedy.

This is the work of the Gospel.

The Gospel proclaims Christ as the Deliverer from sin, death, and condemnation.

Neither Free Will nor human reason can discover this remedy.

How could they?

They are themselves in darkness.

They do not even possess sufficient light to recognise the disease from which they suffer.

Instead, they imagine themselves healthy when in reality they are sick unto death.

Paul teaches the same truth in Galatians chapter three.

There he asks:

"Wherefore then serveth the law?"

And he answers, not as the Diatribe imagines, but in these words:

"It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made."

Notice carefully what Paul says.

The Law was added because of transgressions.

Its purpose was not to remove sin or restrain it by the gift of righteousness. That blessing was reserved for Christ, the promised Seed.

Rather, the Law was given to expose sin and make it known.

As Paul says elsewhere:

"Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound."

This does not mean that the Law created sin where none previously existed.

Men sinned before the Law was given.

But they did not recognise the true nature or extent of their sin.

Indeed, the greatest sins were often regarded as acts of righteousness.

While sin remains hidden, no remedy is sought.

A man who believes himself healthy sees no need of a physician.

Likewise, a sinner who is ignorant of his condition sees no need of grace.

Therefore the Law is necessary.

It reveals sin.

It strips away self-confidence.

It humbles the proud heart.

It shows a man the greatness of his guilt and his inability to save himself.

Then, having been brought low, he begins to hunger and thirst for the grace that is laid up in Christ.

Observe therefore the simplicity and power of Paul's statement:

"By the law is the knowledge of sin."

These few words are sufficient to overthrow Free Will entirely.

For if Free Will does not even know what sin is until the Law reveals it, how can it possibly know what righteousness is?

Paul says again in Romans chapter seven:

"I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet."

If man cannot recognise sin without divine instruction, how can he discover righteousness by his own powers?

If he is ignorant of his disease, how can he find the cure?

We are born in sin.

We live in sin.

We move and exist in sin.

Sin reigns within us.

How then can we know, by our own powers, the righteousness that comes from God and exists outside of us?

The answer is obvious.

We cannot.

And thus the miserable pretensions of Free Will collapse entirely.

For if it cannot even recognise sin without the teaching of the Law, still less can it attain righteousness without the grace of God.

Section CXLVI

"But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference. For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:21–24)

Here Paul hurls thunderbolts against Free Will.

First, he declares that the righteousness of God is manifested "without the law."

By this expression he distinguishes between the righteousness of God and the righteousness that men seek through the Law.

The righteousness of faith comes by grace and not by works.

Therefore, when Paul says "without the law," he can mean nothing less than that this righteousness exists apart from the works of the Law.

The works of the Law contribute nothing towards obtaining it.

As he says elsewhere:

"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."

And again:

"By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight."

From these declarations it is evident that the efforts and desires of Free Will accomplish nothing toward obtaining the righteousness of God.

For if the righteousness of God exists apart from the Law and apart from the works of the Law, how much more does it exist apart from Free Will?

The highest achievement of Free Will is to devote itself to moral righteousness and obedience to the Law.

Yet Paul excludes even these.

The word "without" sweeps them all away.

It abolishes moral works.

It abolishes moral righteousness.

It abolishes every supposed preparation for grace.

Gather together everything that can be claimed on behalf of Free Will, and Paul's testimony still stands:

The righteousness of God is "without" it.

Even if we were to concede that Free Will can direct itself toward civil virtue or outward obedience to the moral law, it still does not follow that it can move toward the righteousness of God.

For God does not regard such efforts as contributing anything toward justification.

And if they do not contribute toward the righteousness of God, what advantage is there in them with respect to salvation?

The words are plain.

No obscurity remains.

No figurative interpretation can remove their force.

Section CXLVII

Another thunderbolt follows.

The Apostle declares that the righteousness of God is manifested and is available:

"Unto all and upon all them that believe."

And again:

"For there is no difference."

Here Paul divides the whole human race into two distinct classes in the clearest possible manner.

To those who believe, he gives the righteousness of God.

From those who do not believe, he withholds it.

Now, no one, I suppose, will venture to deny that the power or endeavour of Free-will is something different from faith in Christ. Yet Paul declares that anything outside this faith is not the righteousness of God.

If it is not righteousness before God, it must be sin.

For before God there is no middle ground between righteousness and sin. Whatever is neither righteousness nor sin is nothing at all. Otherwise, Paul's entire argument falls to the ground.

His reasoning rests wholly upon this distinction: whatever is done by men must be, in the sight of God, either righteousness if it is done in faith, or sin if faith is absent.

Among men, indeed, many things take place in ordinary life which are neither considered righteous nor condemned as sinful. Such things are commonly called indifferent or neutral matters.

But here Paul most plainly distinguishes between two kinds of righteousness, assigning one to the Law and the other to grace. He declares that the latter is given without the former and without works, while the former neither justifies nor profits anything apart from the latter.

I should be glad, therefore, to see how Free-will can maintain its position or defend itself against such Scriptures.

The ungodly man sins against God whether he eats or drinks, or whatever else he does. He abuses the creatures of God through his ungodliness and continual ingratitude, and never, at any time, gives glory to God from his heart.

Therefore, even those actions which men regard as indifferent are not indifferent before God when performed by an unbelieving heart. For whatever does not proceed from faith remains under sin.

Thus Paul's distinction stands firm. The righteousness of God belongs to believers alone; all who are outside of faith remain under sin. Consequently, whatever Free-will attempts apart from faith cannot be righteousness before God, but must necessarily be sin.

Section CXLVIII

This also is no powerless thunderbolt.

The Apostle declares:

"All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."

"For there is no difference."

Romans 3:23

What could be spoken more plainly?

Produce, if you can, one of your champions of Free-will and answer this question: Does this man sin in his endeavour and striving, or does

he not?

If he does not sin, why does Paul not exempt him? Why does he include him among all others without exception? Surely, he who says "all" excludes no one, whether in any place, at any time, or in any work or endeavour.

Therefore, if you exempt any man, or any work, or any devout striving, you make Paul a liar. For Paul includes every advocate of Free-will among those who have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Had there been even one exception, Paul would certainly have mentioned him instead of numbering him among the universal company of sinners.

Consider also those words:

"Come short of the glory of God."

The expression "glory of God" may be understood in two ways, either actively or passively, for Paul often uses Hebrew forms of expression.

Actively understood, it means the glory which belongs to God Himself.

Passively understood, it means the glory which comes from God and is bestowed by Him.

The latter sense appears to fit this passage best.

Thus, "the faith of Christ" does not mean Christ's own faith, but faith in Christ. Likewise, "the righteousness of God" signifies not God's own righteousness as an attribute, but the righteousness that comes from God and is accepted before Him.

In the same way, "the glory of God" signifies the glory which we receive from God and possess before Him.

A man glories in God when he knows with certainty that God is favourable towards him, that God regards him with kindness, that his works are accepted, and that even his failures are borne with and forgiven.

If, therefore, the endeavour of Free-will is truly good before God and not sin, it ought to be able to glory before God. It ought to be able to say confidently:

"This pleases God. God approves of this. God accepts this."

Such confidence is the glorying of faith.

But Paul expressly denies that men possess such confidence. He says they have all come short of it.

Experience itself confirms this.

Ask every defender of Free-will whether he can honestly and from the heart say of any one of his own efforts:

"This certainly pleases God."

If you can produce even one man who can say this with full assurance, I will confess myself defeated.

But no such man exists.

And if this confidence is absent—if the conscience cannot firmly declare that God is pleased—then it follows that the work does not please God.

For as a man believes, so it is unto him. If he cannot believe with certainty that God accepts him, he remains in doubt. And doubt concerning God's favour is itself unbelief.

God requires us to believe with assurance that He is gracious and favourable. Therefore, by the testimony of their own consciences, the advocates of Free-will stand convicted. Being without the glory of God, all their powers, efforts, and devout endeavours remain under the guilt of unbelief.

What, then, shall they do with the words that immediately follow?

"Being justified freely by his grace."

What does "freely" mean?

What does "by his grace" mean?

How can merit and human endeavour be reconciled with a righteousness that is freely given?

Perhaps they will answer that they attribute only a very little to Free-will, and not merit in the strict sense.

But these are merely words.

The whole purpose of defending Free-will is to preserve some place for merit.

Throughout this controversy they continually argue:

"If there is no Free-will, how can there be merit? If there is no merit, how can there be reward? To whom shall reward be given if justification is not obtained through merit?"

Paul gives a different answer.

There is no merit at all.

Men are justified freely.

The whole work belongs to the grace of God.

And if righteousness is freely given, then the kingdom, life, and eternal salvation that accompany it are freely given also.

Where now are your merits?

Where are your efforts?

Where are the achievements of Free-will?

Where is the profit of all these things together?

The defenders of Free-will cannot escape by appealing to obscurities here. The words are perfectly plain.

Even when they claim that Free-will contributes only a very little, they still maintain that by that little contribution a man attains righteousness and grace.

Thus they solve the question, "Why is one man justified and not another?" by saying that one man endeavours after grace while another does not, and that God rewards the one who strives.

But if God grants grace because one man has endeavoured and withholds it because another has not, then grace is no longer grace. God becomes a respecter of persons and a rewarder of merit.

Though they loudly insist that they do not teach merit of worthiness, they retain the thing itself while merely changing its name.

For what is the difference between saying:

"This is not merit of worthiness,"

and then assigning to it everything that belongs to merit of worthiness?

If grace is given because one man strives and withheld because another does not, then merit has simply been disguised under another title.

It is no different from saying:

"The thorn is not a bad tree, but it produces the same fruit as a bad tree."

Or:

"The fig tree is not a good tree, but it bears the same fruit as a good tree."

Such distinctions are nothing but words. The reality remains unchanged.

Section CXLIX

It has happened to the defenders of Free-will according to the old proverb:

"In striving to avoid Scylla's rock, they run headlong into Charybdis."

In their determination to distance themselves from the Pelagians, they begin by denying all merit and worthiness. Yet by the very means through

which they attempt to deny it, they establish it more firmly than ever.

They deny it with their words, but establish it in reality and in their hearts.

Thus, in certain respects, they are even worse than the Pelagians themselves, and for two reasons.

First, the Pelagians openly and honestly asserted the merit and worthiness of works. They spoke plainly and without disguise. Our modern defenders of Free-will, however, while believing and teaching essentially the same thing, conceal their views beneath deceptive language and pretend to oppose the Pelagians when in reality they agree with them.

Thus, in appearance they seem to be the strongest opponents of Pelagianism, but in substance and conviction they are twice Pelagians.

Secondly, under this cloak of hypocrisy they value and purchase the grace of God at a far lower price than the Pelagians ever did.

The Pelagians taught that grace was obtained through great efforts, many works, and devoted exertions. They placed a high value upon grace, however wrongly.

But our modern teachers maintain that grace may be obtained by a small effort, a slight movement of the will, almost by a mere nothing.

If error must be embraced, those at least are more honest and less arrogant who say that grace is purchased at a great price, and who therefore regard it as precious and valuable, than those who teach that it may be obtained for almost nothing and thus make it cheap and contemptible.

Nevertheless, Paul crushes both parties alike with a single blow when he declares that all are:

"Justified freely."

And again, that they are justified:

"Without the law,"

and

"Without the deeds of the law."

The man who insists that justification is entirely free leaves no room for works, merits, preparations, or human qualifications of any kind.

He leaves no place for what the schoolmen call "merit of congruity" or "merit of worthiness."

With this one thunderbolt Paul shatters both the Pelagians with their great merits and the sophists with their little merits.

For if justification is free, then all works are excluded.

A free gift and a work of preparation are opposites and cannot stand together.

Furthermore, justification by grace allows no regard for the worthiness of any person whatsoever.

As Paul later declares in Romans 11:

"And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace."

Likewise in Romans 4:

"Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt."

Therefore Paul stands as an invincible destroyer of Free-will. With a single word he lays two armies in the dust.

For if we are justified "without works," then all works are excluded—whether they be great or small.

He makes no exceptions.

His thunder falls equally upon all.

Section CL

Here you may see the astonishing blindness of all our teachers, and how dangerous it is to rely merely upon the authority of the ancient fathers, even those who have been approved throughout so many centuries.

Were they not all equally blind to these most clear and manifest words of Paul? Indeed, did they not largely disregard them?

For what could be spoken more clearly or plainly in defence of grace and against Free-will than the Apostle's argument in these passages?

Paul proceeds with great force of reasoning. He exalts grace above works in language that could scarcely be clearer. He declares that we are:

"Justified freely,"

and that:

"Grace is no more grace"

if it is sought through works.

Thus he most plainly excludes all works from the matter of justification, in order that grace alone and free justification might stand.

Yet, in spite of all this light, we continue to seek darkness. We endeavour to find obscure explanations, and to invent distinctions and evasions, simply so that some place might still be left for works.

We refuse to allow all things to be ascribed to grace alone. Instead, we seek some contribution of our own, so that grace may not be entirely free, and so that our own will may retain some measure of glory.

As though he who says that grace accomplishes all things thereby denies that things are accomplished. Or as though he who says that works contribute nothing to justification thereby teaches that works themselves do not exist.

Most plainly of all, after Paul has established that we are justified by grace alone, without any works whatsoever, and without the law itself—which comprehends all works, both great and small—he excludes not only works of worthiness but even those lesser works which men call merits of congruity.

Go now, then, and boast of the authority of the ancient fathers. Depend upon what they say. Yet you see that all of them, being men, overlooked Paul, that most plain and faithful teacher, and, as it were, turned away from this bright and shining light because they were captivated by their own fleshly reasoning.

Section CLI

Let us now consider the example which Paul himself immediately introduces:

"For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the Scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness." (Romans 4:2–3)

Observe here, I pray you, the distinction made by Paul. He sets before us two kinds of righteousness in Abraham.

The first is the righteousness of works—that is, moral and civil righteousness. Paul does not deny that Abraham possessed this righteousness. Indeed, before men he had much of which he might glory. Yet before God he was not justified by it. Though righteous in the sight of men, he remained without the glory of God.

Nor can anyone claim that Paul is speaking merely of ceremonial works or works of the Mosaic Law, for Abraham lived many centuries before the Law was given. Paul is plainly speaking of Abraham's own works, and of all his works. It would be absurd to argue whether Abraham was justified by works of ceremonies that did not yet exist.

Therefore, if Abraham was not justified by any works whatsoever,

and if both he himself and all his works remained under condemnation until he received another righteousness, namely the righteousness of faith, then it is evident that no man can become righteous before God by works.

No works, no efforts, no endeavours, and no preparations avail anything in the sight of God. Apart from faith they remain ungodly, unrighteous, and evil.

For if the man himself is not righteous, neither can his works or endeavours be righteous. And if they are not righteous, they are worthy of condemnation and deserve wrath.

The second righteousness is the righteousness of faith. This does not consist in works but in the gracious favour and imputation of God through faith.

Notice how Paul continually returns to the word imputed. He repeats it, presses it, and emphasises it throughout the chapter.

"Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." (Romans 4:4–5)

Then he brings forward David, who teaches the same truth concerning the imputation of righteousness through grace:

"Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin." (Romans 4:8)

In this chapter Paul uses the word impute more than ten times.

In short, he carefully distinguishes between "him that worketh" and "him that worketh not," leaving no middle ground between them.

He declares that righteousness is not imputed to the one who works, but that righteousness is imputed to the one who does not work, but believes.

Here Free-will, with all its efforts and endeavours, finds no place of escape. It must belong either to the class of "him that worketh" or to the class of "him that worketh not."

If it belongs to "him that worketh," you hear Paul declare that righteousness is not imputed to it.

If it belongs to "him that worketh not, but believeth," then righteousness is imputed to it. Yet in that case it is no longer the power of Free-will, but the new creature brought forth by faith.

And if righteousness is not imputed to it when it is among those who work, then it follows that all its works are nothing but sins, evils, and

impieties before God.

Nor can any sophist evade the force of this argument by saying that, although the man is evil, his works may nevertheless be good.

Paul is not speaking merely of the man considered apart from his actions. He specifically speaks of "him that worketh," in order to show plainly that the works and endeavours themselves are condemned, whatever their appearance, whatever their name, and under whatever form they may be performed.

Indeed, he is especially speaking of good works, because the whole subject under discussion is justification and merit.

When Paul speaks of "him that worketh," he includes all works, but especially those works that men regard as good and meritorious.

Otherwise, his distinction between "him that worketh" and "him that worketh not" would lose all meaning.

Section CLII

Here I omit many other powerful arguments drawn from the purpose of God, the divine promise, the nature of the law, original sin, and the election of God. Any one of these, by itself, is sufficient to overthrow Free-will completely.

For if grace comes by the purpose and election of God, then it comes by necessity and not by any effort or endeavour of our own, as I have already shown.

Moreover, if grace was promised before the law was given, as Paul argues both here and throughout his Epistle to the Galatians, then it cannot come through works or through the law. Otherwise, the promise would be rendered void.

Likewise, faith itself would become meaningless, through which Abraham was justified before the law was ever given.

Again, since the law is the strength of sin, and serves only to reveal sin rather than remove it, it brings the conscience before God as guilty and condemned. This is what Paul means when he says:

"The law worketh wrath."

How then can righteousness be obtained through the law? And if the law itself cannot help us, how much less can the power of Free-will help us?

Furthermore, since all men lie under the same sin and condemnation

through the one man Adam, how can we attempt anything that is not sinful and worthy of condemnation?

When Paul says "all," he excludes no one. He excludes neither Free-will nor any of its powers. Whether a man works or does not work, attempts or does not attempt, he is included among that "all."

Nor can anyone claim that Adam's sin condemns us only by imitation. If that were so, it would not truly be Adam's sin that condemns us, but our own. No man is condemned before God merely for copying another person's sin.

Rather, Adam's sin becomes ours by generation, not merely by imitation. It is our own sin because we are born with it.

Original sin, therefore, leaves no power remaining in Free-will except the power of sinning and proceeding ever onward toward condemnation.

These arguments I pass over for the present, partly because they are so clear and powerful in themselves, and partly because I have already touched upon them elsewhere.

Indeed, if I wished to produce all the passages in Paul which overthrow Free-will, I could scarcely do better than provide a continuous commentary on the whole Epistle to the Romans, just as I have already done in discussing chapters three and four.

I have dwelt particularly upon these chapters in order to expose the astonishing blindness of the defenders of Free-will, who read Paul in his clearest passages and yet fail to see his most powerful arguments against their position.

At the same time, I have wished to expose the folly of placing such confidence in the authority and writings of the ancient teachers. If they are mistaken in passages as plain as these, one may imagine how much more vulnerable they would be if the remaining arguments were examined carefully and thoroughly.

Section CLIII

As for myself, I must confess that when I read Paul, especially when he employs such universal expressions as:

"All have turned aside,"

"There is none that doeth good, no, not one,"

"All have sinned,"

"All are under sin,"

"All are condemned by the offence of one man, Adam,"

"All are justified freely,"

"Without the law,"

"Without the works of the law,"

I am utterly astonished that words and sentences so clear, direct, and universal should have given rise to so many contrary interpretations.

For men have dared to conclude from these very passages that some have not gone astray, that some are not unrighteous, that some are not evil, that some are not sinners, and that some are not condemned.

They maintain that there remains within man something good, some power that strives after righteousness.

Yet how can this be, when the man who strives after good is himself included in that universal declaration:

"All,"

"None,"

"Not one"?

If Paul had spoken in this way only once, or in one isolated passage, perhaps some room might have been left for uncertainty or evasion.

But he uses these expressions continually, both positively and negatively.

He repeats the same truth throughout his argument. His distinctions, his conclusions, his illustrations, and the entire structure of his reasoning all point in the same direction.

Not only the words themselves, but everything that comes before and after them, the circumstances, the purpose, and the whole body of his argument compel us to conclude that Paul's meaning is this:

Outside of faith in Christ there is nothing but sin and condemnation.

This, then, was the task I undertook when I promised to refute Free-will in such a manner that our opponents would be unable to resist the force of the argument.

I believe that I have accomplished that purpose.

Whether they acknowledge themselves defeated, abandon their position, or remain silent, is not within my power.

That belongs to the work of the Spirit of God alone.

Before we come to the testimony of the Evangelist John, I shall add one more decisive witness from Paul. If this is not sufficient, I am prepared to oppose Free-will by expounding Paul's writings throughout.

In Romans chapter 8, Paul divides the whole human race into two distinct classes: the flesh and the Spirit, just as Christ does in John chapter 3.

He writes:

"They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit."

It is evident that Paul calls all men carnal who are not spiritual. This is clear both from the division itself and from the contrast between flesh and Spirit. It is also clear from his own words:

"But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."

What else can this mean except that those who do not possess the Spirit are necessarily in the flesh? And if a man does not belong to Christ, to whom does he belong but Satan?

It follows, therefore, that all who are without the Spirit are in the flesh and under the dominion of Satan.

Now let us consider what Paul says concerning the power and endeavour of Free-will in those who are in the flesh.

He declares:

"They that are in the flesh cannot please God."

Again:

"The carnal mind is death."

Again:

"The carnal mind is enmity against God."

And again:

"It is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be."

Let the defenders of Free-will answer this.

How can that endeavour toward good which is death itself, which cannot please God, which is enmity against God, which is not subject to God's law, and which cannot be subject to it?

Paul does not merely say that the carnal mind possesses death and enmity. He says that it is death itself and enmity itself. Therefore, it cannot

possibly be subject to God or pleasing to Him.

A little earlier Paul had already written:

"For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son..."

I am well aware of Origen's theory of the threefold affection of man. He speaks of flesh, soul, and spirit, making the soul a middle principle capable of turning either toward flesh or toward spirit.

But these are merely his own speculations. He asserts them without proving them.

Paul here calls everything flesh that is without the Spirit, as has already been shown. Therefore, even the highest virtues of the noblest men belong to the flesh when they are outside the Spirit. They are dead, hostile to God, not subject to His law, unable to be subject to it, and unable to please Him.

Paul does not merely say that they are not subject. He says they cannot be subject.

Christ teaches the same truth:

"A corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit." (Matthew 7)

And again:

"How can ye, being evil, speak good things?" (Matthew 12)

Here Christ teaches not only that evil men speak evil things, but that they cannot speak good things.

Someone may object that Christ also says:

"Ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children."

Yet even there Christ does not teach that evil men perform truly good works. The gifts are good because they are God's creatures. But the men themselves remain evil.

An evil tree may produce something outwardly beneficial, but it cannot produce that which is good before God.

Christ speaks these words to mankind generally, indeed even to His own disciples.

Thus these two principles remain firmly established:

"The just shall live by faith."

And:

"Whatsoever is not of faith is sin."

The second necessarily follows from the first.

If faith alone justifies, then all who are without faith remain unjustified.

If they are unjustified, they remain sinners.

If they are sinners, they are evil trees.

And evil trees can produce nothing but evil fruit.

Therefore Free-will is nothing but a servant of sin, death, and Satan. It can do nothing, will nothing, attempt nothing, and accomplish nothing except evil.

Section CLV

Add to this that testimony taken from Isaiah:

"I was found of them that sought me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me."

These words refer to the Gentiles. It was granted to them to hear and know Christ, although previously they neither knew Him, sought Him, nor prepared themselves for Him by any power of Free-will.

From this testimony it is abundantly clear that grace comes so freely that no thought, desire, endeavour, or preparation on man's part goes before it.

Consider also Paul himself. When he was still Saul, what thought had he of grace? What desire had he for it? What effort did he make toward obtaining it?

Indeed, according to human reason, he was pursuing what appeared to be most noble, righteous, and meritorious. Yet by what endeavours did he attain grace?

Not only did he fail to seek it, but he received it while furiously raging against it and striving with all his might to destroy it.

On the other hand, Paul says concerning the Jews:

"The Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness."

What answer can the advocates of Free-will give to this?

The Gentiles, immersed in ungodliness and every vice, receive righteousness freely from a merciful and gracious God.

Meanwhile the Jews, pursuing righteousness with all their zeal, devotion, and effort, fail to obtain it.

Is not Paul plainly teaching that all the striving of Free-will is vain, even when it appears to be directed toward what is best? Does he not

show that Free-will, left to itself, can only fall backward and become worse rather than better?

Nor can anyone claim that the Jews lacked earnestness or diligence in their pursuit of righteousness. Paul himself bears witness concerning them:

"They have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge."

Nothing that could be attributed to Free-will was lacking in them. Yet all their efforts ended in failure.

On the other hand, the Gentiles possessed none of those things commonly attributed to Free-will, and yet they obtained the righteousness of God.

What is this but the clearest possible testimony from both sides?

In the Gentiles we see grace bestowed upon those who neither sought it nor deserved it.

In the Jews we see that the greatest efforts, the strongest zeal, and the most determined pursuit of righteousness accomplish nothing.

Thus Paul proves that grace is given freely to the undeserving and unworthy, and that it is not attained by any efforts, endeavours, preparations, or works of men, whether those works be great or small, whether performed by the most moral and devout, or by those who pursue righteousness with the greatest fervour and zeal.

Section CLVI

Let us now come to John, who is also a most powerful and abundant destroyer of Free-will.

At the very beginning of his Gospel, he attributes such blindness to man's will that it cannot even see the light of truth, much less strive after it.

He writes:

"The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not."

And immediately afterwards:

"He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not."

What do you suppose John means by the term "world"?

Can any man be excluded from it except those who have been born again by the Holy Spirit?

This apostle frequently uses the term "world" to mean the whole race of mankind. Therefore, whatever he says concerning the world must be understood as applying to all men generally.

Consequently, whatever he says about the world must also apply to Free-will, which is regarded as the chief and noblest faculty in man.

According to John, the world does not know the light of truth.

The world hates Christ and His people.

The world neither knows nor receives the Holy Spirit.

The whole world lies in wickedness.

All that is in the world is:

"The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life."

Again he says:

"Love not the world."

And:

"Ye are not of the world."

And again:

"The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil."

These and many similar passages are clear declarations concerning the true condition of Free-will, which is the principal part of that world lying under the dominion of Satan.

John constantly uses the term "world" in contrast to the kingdom of God, meaning everything that has not been translated into the kingdom of the Spirit.

Thus Christ says to His disciples:

"I have chosen you out of the world."

If there were any people in the world who, by the power of Free-will, could strive toward good and attain it, John ought surely to have made some exception for them. Otherwise, by condemning the whole world, he would unjustly include them among those evils he attributes to it.

But he makes no such exception.

Therefore it is evident that he charges Free-will with everything that is said of the world. For whatever the world does, it does through its will and reason, which are its highest faculties.

John then proceeds:

"But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the

will of man, but of God."

Having established this distinction, John excludes from the kingdom of Christ everything that is of blood, of the will of the flesh, and of the will of man.

By "blood" I understand the Jews, who gloried in their descent from Abraham and trusted in their natural birth and ancestry.

By "the will of the flesh" I understand the devoted efforts of those who sought righteousness through the law and through works. Here "flesh" signifies the natural man without the Spirit, possessing will and effort, yet remaining carnal because the Spirit is absent.

By "the will of man" I understand the endeavours of mankind generally, whether Jew or Gentile, whether under the law or apart from it.

The meaning is therefore this:

Men become the sons of God neither by natural birth, nor by obedience to the law, nor by any human effort whatsoever, but solely by a divine birth.

If men are neither born of the flesh, nor trained into sonship by the law, nor prepared for it by human discipline, but are born of God alone, then it is evident that Free-will contributes nothing.

I take the phrase "the will of man" according to the Hebrew manner of speaking, meaning man generally, indeed all mankind. And just as "flesh" signifies all people without the Spirit, so "the will of man" signifies the highest power in man, namely Free-will itself.

Yet we need not rest our case upon the individual words alone. The whole force of John's argument is perfectly clear.

By this distinction he excludes everything that is not of divine generation. He teaches that men become the children of God only by being born of God; that is, as he himself explains, by believing in His name.

Therefore, in excluding "the will of man," he necessarily excludes Free-will, since Free-will is not a divine generation.

If Free-will contributed anything toward making men the children of God, John ought not to have rejected it. Nor ought he to have directed men away from it and toward faith and the new birth alone.

Otherwise the rebuke of Isaiah would rightly apply to him:

"Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil."

Since John rejects alike "blood," "the will of the flesh," and "the will of man," it follows that the will of man contributes no more toward making

men the children of God than natural descent contributes.

And no one doubts that natural birth does not make men the children of God.

For as Paul says in Romans 9:

"They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God."

This he proves by the examples of Ishmael and Esau.

Section CLVII

The same John introduces John the Baptist speaking of Christ in these words:

"And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace."

He declares that we receive from the fulness of Christ.

But for what reason do we receive it? Is it because of our own devoted efforts and endeavours?

No. He says:

"Grace for grace."

That is, grace received from His grace.

Paul says the same thing in Romans 5:

"The grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many."

Where now is that power of Free-will by which grace is supposedly obtained?

John teaches that grace is not received because of any effort of our own. Indeed, it is received because of the grace of another—namely, the grace of Jesus Christ.

Therefore one of two things must be true.

Either it is false that we receive grace through the grace of another, or else it is evident that Free-will is nothing.

For these two things cannot stand together:

that the grace of God is so cheap that it may be obtained by the slightest endeavour of man, and yet so precious that it is bestowed only through the grace of the one Mediator, Jesus Christ.

I would also remind the advocates of Free-will that, in maintaining their doctrine, they effectively deny Christ.

For if I obtain grace by my own efforts, what need have I of Christ's grace in order to receive grace?

And if I can obtain the grace of God by my own preparations, what further need have I of Christ?

Yet the Diatribe and the sophists continually teach that men obtain grace and prepare themselves to receive it by their own endeavours—not according to merit of worthiness, they say, but according to merit of congruity.

But this is simply a denial of Christ.

For John expressly teaches that we receive grace through Christ's grace.

As for those distinctions between "worthiness" and "congruity," I have already shown that they are nothing more than verbal evasions. Under different names they still preserve the same principle of human merit.

Indeed, they go even further than the Pelagians themselves. Therefore these sophists, together with the Diatribe, have denied the Lord who bought us more completely than many ancient heretics ever did.

So far is it from being true that grace leaves any room for the power of Free-will.

Moreover, the advocates of Free-will deny Christ not only by their teaching but by their practice.

For through their doctrine they have transformed Christ from a gracious Mediator into a terrifying Judge.

Instead of trusting His intercession, they seek the intercessions of the Virgin Mary and the saints.

Instead of resting upon His blood and grace, they invent ceremonies, vows, ordinances, pilgrimages, and works by which they hope to appease Him and obtain favour.

They strive to secure grace through their own efforts rather than through Christ's mediation.

Yet they do not truly believe that Christ intercedes for them before the Father and obtains grace for them by His own blood and grace, as John here teaches.

And as men believe, so it becomes unto them.

To such people Christ becomes an inexorable Judge—and rightly so.

For they forsake Him as Mediator and most merciful Saviour, counting His blood and grace of less value than the efforts and endeavours of their own Free-will.

Now let us hear an example of Free-will.

Nicodemus is a man in whom there is everything that Free-will is supposed to be able to accomplish. For what does that man lack in devoted effort and endeavour? He confesses Christ to be true and to have come from God. He acknowledges His miracles. He comes by night to hear Him and converse with Him.

Does he not appear to have sought after those things which pertain to piety and salvation by the power of Free-will?

But mark what shipwreck he makes.

When he hears Christ teach the true way of salvation through the new birth, does he acknowledge that this is what he had been seeking?

Far from it.

He recoils from it, is confounded by it, and not only confesses that he does not understand it, but even declares it to be impossible.

"How can these things be?"

Indeed, who had ever heard before that a man must be born again unto salvation by water and by the Spirit?

Who had ever imagined that the Son of God must be lifted up, so that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life?

Did the greatest philosophers ever speak of such things?

Did the rulers of this world ever possess such knowledge?

Did Free-will ever attain to these truths by its own efforts and endeavours?

Does not Paul call this

"the wisdom of God in a mystery,"

foretold indeed by the prophets, but revealed through the Gospel?

It was hidden and unknown to the world.

In a word, let experience testify.

Let the whole world testify.

Human reason itself is compelled to confess that before the Gospel came into the world it neither knew Christ nor had ever heard of Him.

And if it did not know Him, much less could it seek after Him, strive for Him, or endeavour to come unto Him.

Yet Christ is the Way, the Truth, the Life, and Salvation itself.

Free-will must therefore confess, whether it wishes to or not, that by its own power it neither knew nor sought those things which pertain

unto the way of truth and salvation.

And yet, contrary to its own confession, it still disputes in empty words that there remains within man some power which can both know and seek after those things that belong to salvation.

What is this but to say that Christ, the Son of God, was lifted up for men who neither knew nor imagined such a thing, and yet that this very ignorance is actually knowledge?

That is, that ignorance of Christ is knowledge of Christ.

Do you not plainly see that the defenders of Free-will are driven into absurdity?

They call that knowledge which they themselves confess to be ignorance.

Is not this to

"put darkness for light"

as Isaiah says?

Although God so powerfully silences Free-will by its own confession and by universal experience, it still refuses to be silent and give God the glory.

Section CLIX

As, therefore, Christ is said to be "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," and that by positive assertion, so that whatever is not Christ is not the way but error, is not the truth but a lie, is not the life but death, it necessarily follows that Free-will, being neither Christ nor in Christ, must be held captive under error, falsehood, and death.

Where now shall that neutral or middle ground be found?

Where is that supposed power of Free-will which, though not in Christ, is yet neither error nor truth, neither life nor death, but something in between?

For if all that Scripture says concerning Christ and grace is not spoken by way of positive assertion, so as to oppose Christ to all that is contrary to Him—if outside Christ there is not Satan, outside grace not wrath, outside light not darkness, outside life not death—then what purpose is served by all the writings of the apostles, or indeed by the whole of Scripture?

The whole would have been written in vain.

For its chief purpose is to establish the necessity of Christ.

Yet all this would be overturned if there were found some middle state in man which was neither good nor evil, neither Christ's nor Satan's, neither true nor false, neither living nor dead, neither something nor nothing, and which could be called "the most excellent and highest part" of human nature.

Take the matter whichever way you please.

If you admit that the Scriptures speak positively and decisively, then you can say nothing in favour of Free-will that does not stand in opposition to Christ. In that case, error, death, Satan, and every evil reign in it.

If, however, you deny that Scripture speaks positively, then you destroy the authority of Scripture itself. It establishes nothing—not even the necessity of Christ.

Thus, while attempting to establish Free-will, you abolish Christ and overthrow the whole testimony of Scripture.

And though you may verbally profess Christ, in reality and in your heart you deny Him.

For if the power of Free-will is not wholly corrupt and condemned, but can see, desire, and pursue what is good and beneficial toward salvation, then it remains sound and complete in itself.

Such a faculty would have no need of Christ the Physician.

Nor would Christ redeem that part of man.

For what need has light where light already exists?

What need has life where life is already present?

Furthermore, if that power is not redeemed, then the noblest part of man remains unredeemed, being already good and whole by nature.

In that case, God would be unjust in condemning any man.

For He would be condemning that which is best in man and which remains sound and innocent.

Every man possesses Free-will.

And though, according to this teaching, an evil man may misuse it, the faculty itself remains unimpaired and continues to strive toward what is good.

If that be so, it must itself be good, holy, and righteous.

Why then should it be condemned?

Indeed, it ought to be separated from the evil man and preserved from condemnation.

Yet this cannot be done.

And even if it could, man would cease to be man. He would no longer possess either merit or demerit. He could neither be saved nor condemned. He would become no more than a brute creature and would lose that moral responsibility which belongs to an immortal soul.

It follows, therefore, that God would be unjust if He condemned that good, righteous, and holy power which, according to this doctrine, exists within every evil man and stands in no need of Christ, though the man himself supposedly does.

Such conclusions reveal the absurdity into which the defenders of Free-will are driven.

For either Christ redeems the whole man, or He redeems none of him.

If any part of man remains spiritually sound and able of itself to seek God, then that part needs no Redeemer. But if it needs no Redeemer, then Christ is not the Saviour of the whole man.

And if Christ is not the Saviour of the whole man, then the Gospel itself is overthrown.

Section CLX

But let us proceed with John.

"He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

Tell me then: Is Free-will included among those who believe, or is it not?

If it is, then once again it has no need of grace. For it believes in Christ by its own power, though it neither knew Him nor sought Him by nature.

But if it is not included among those who believe, then it remains under condemnation. And what is this but to say that it stands condemned before God?

Yet God condemns none but the ungodly.

Therefore Free-will itself must be ungodly.

And what godliness can proceed from that which is itself ungodly?

Nor let anyone imagine that Free-will can somehow be exempted from this judgment. John speaks of man as a whole when he says that he is condemned already.

Moreover, unbelief is not merely one outward act among many sins. It is the root and governing principle seated in the heart. As John says

elsewhere:

"He that believeth not God hath made him a liar."

How then can that faculty which stands opposed to God and makes Him a liar endeavour after that which is good?

If Free-will were not itself unbelieving and ungodly, John ought not to have spoken of the whole man as condemned already. Rather, he should have said:

"Man, according to his lower and grosser affections, is condemned already; but according to that which is highest and most excellent in him, namely his reason and will, he is not condemned, but is already believing and seeking after faith."

But John says nothing of the kind.

Indeed, wherever Scripture declares:

"All men are liars,"

the advocates of Free-will would have us understand the opposite. According to them, man is a liar only in his lower nature, while his reason and will remain sound, holy, and upright.

The Baptist speaks again:

"He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."

According to the doctrine of Free-will, this too must be reinterpreted.

The wrath of God, they would say, abides only upon the lower affections of man. Upon his reason, his will, and that noble faculty called Free-will, there rests grace and eternal life.

For, according to their teaching, man is not wholly a liar. His highest powers remain good and capable of seeking God.

Thus, in order to preserve Free-will at all costs, whatever Scripture says concerning the ungodly is transferred only to the lower part of man, while the truly rational and human part is carefully sheltered from every accusation.

Indeed, if this doctrine were true, a man might sin with complete confidence, saying:

"My reason and will cannot be condemned. Free-will remains sound and righteous. Though my flesh may be judged and destroyed, the noblest part of me remains untouched."

And so he might rejoice in his reason and will, while allowing his sinful flesh to perish.

In this way Christ would cease to be a Redeemer altogether.

For if the highest and best part of man requires no redemption, then Christ has not redeemed man as man, but only some inferior portion of him.

Such is the end to which the doctrine of Free-will inevitably leads.

It overturns all things, both divine and human, temporal and eternal. And after producing such absurdities, it still congratulates itself as though it had achieved some great victory.

Section CLXI

Again, the Baptist saith:

"A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven."

Let not the Diatribe here repeat its catalogue of those things which we receive from heaven. We are not now disputing concerning the nature of man, nor concerning those gifts by which man was originally constituted a rational creature upon earth.

The question before us is this: Whether man possesses anything of himself whereby he may prepare himself for grace, seek after God, or attain unto salvation.

To this the Baptist gives a plain answer:

"A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven."

If a man can receive nothing, then surely he can neither begin, seek, will, nor accomplish anything pertaining to the kingdom of God, unless it first be given him from above.

The Baptist does not merely say that man cannot perform great things, but that he can receive nothing.

And if he can receive nothing, what room remains for Free-will?

For what can Free-will either possess or attain which has not first been given from heaven?

Therefore Free-will is nothing at all in spiritual matters.

Again he says:

"He that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all."

Here once more all who are outside Christ are declared to be earthly. They savour earthly things, speak earthly things, and understand earthly things.

No middle state is left.

Now Free-will is certainly not "he that cometh from heaven."

Therefore it must belong to that class which is "of the earth."

And if it is of the earth, it must think earthly thoughts, speak earthly words, and desire earthly things.

For if there were in man any faculty which was not earthly—any power which at any time, in any place, or by any effort could rise above earthly things—the Baptist ought to have made an exception.

Yet he makes none.

He speaks universally concerning all who are outside Christ and declares them to be earthly.

Likewise Christ Himself says:

"Ye are of the world; I am not of the world."

"Ye are from beneath; I am from above."

Yet those to whom He spoke possessed what men call Free-will. They had reason, understanding, and will. Nevertheless Christ declares them to be "of the world."

What would there have been remarkable in His words if He meant only that their lower and brutish passions were worldly?

Everyone already knew that.

Even the heathen philosophers acknowledged that men possess lower appetites and desires.

But Christ is speaking of the whole man.

Otherwise beasts also are "of the world," and His statement would amount to nothing.

His meaning is that all that is in man by nature—even his highest powers of reason and will—belongs to the world and remains beneath until renewed by grace from above.

Thus both John and Christ unite in one testimony: whatever is not born from heaven remains earthly.

And whatever remains earthly can neither receive nor produce the things of God.

Therefore all confidence in Free-will is overthrown, and the whole glory of salvation belongs to the grace of God alone.

Section CLXII

And now, what do those words of Christ leave to Free-will, when He says:

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me

draw him."

For Christ declares that it is necessary for every man to hear and learn from the Father Himself, and that all must be taught of God.

Here He not only shows that the works and endeavours of Free-will are powerless, but also that even the outward preaching of the Gospel itself is heard in vain unless the Father speaks within, teaches within, and draws within.

Christ says:

"No man can come to me."

He does not say that no man will come, or that no man easily comes, but that no man can come.

Thus every supposed power by which man might move himself toward Christ, or toward those things that belong to salvation, is declared to be utterly powerless.

Nor does it help the cause of Free-will that the Diatribe appeals to Augustine and his illustration that God draws us in the same way that a sheep is drawn by the sight of a green branch.

By this illustration it seeks to prove that there remains within man some power to follow God's drawing.

But the comparison does not apply to the present passage.

For God does not merely hold before us one of His blessings. He sets before us many blessings—indeed, He sets before us His own Son, Jesus Christ.

Yet no man follows Him merely because He is outwardly presented.

The whole world sees Christ set forth in the Gospel, and still the whole world does not follow Him.

Therefore something more is required.

This illustration may describe the experience of the godly, who know God as their Shepherd and who, being moved inwardly by the Spirit, gladly follow wherever He leads.

But it does not describe the condition of the natural man.

The ungodly man does not come to Christ merely because he hears the Word preached. He comes only when the Father teaches him inwardly and draws him by His Spirit.

When that happens, the drawing is of an entirely different kind from any outward attraction.

Christ is then not merely presented to the ears but revealed to the heart.

The Holy Spirit illuminates the soul, and under that inward illumination the man is drawn to Christ with the sweetest and most powerful drawing imaginable.

In that work the man is not the active mover but the one acted upon.

God speaks.

God teaches.

God draws.

The sinner is taught rather than teaching, drawn rather than drawing, moved rather than moving himself.

Thus Christ's words leave no room for the notion that man can begin his own conversion.

The whole work is attributed to the Father, who draws sinners to the Son by the inward operation of His Spirit.

And where that drawing is absent, all outward hearing, all reasoning, all willing, and all human endeavour remain ineffective.

Section CLXIII

This prepares the way for Luther's final sections, where he begins drawing together all the biblical evidence and moves toward his concluding remarks against Erasmus.

I will produce yet one more passage from John, where he says:

"The Spirit shall reprove the world of sin, because they believe not on me."

Observe here that unbelief in Christ is itself declared to be sin.

This sin is not seated in the skin, nor in the hair, nor in any merely outward part of man, but in the very centre of his being—in his reason and will.

Moreover, Christ pronounces the whole world guilty of this sin.

And since experience plainly teaches that the world is ignorant both of Christ and of this very sin of unbelief, so that it must be revealed and exposed by the Spirit's own reproof, it is evident that Free-will, together with all its powers of reason and choice, stands condemned before God and held captive under this sin.

So long as man neither knows Christ nor believes in Him, he can neither will nor accomplish anything truly good. Rather, he necessarily remains the servant of that sin of which he is ignorant.

In a word, the whole testimony of Scripture concerning Christ is

expressed in positive and exclusive terms. It places everything outside Christ under the dominion of Satan, ungodliness, error, darkness, sin, death, and the wrath of God.

Therefore every testimony concerning Christ stands directly against the doctrine of Free-will.

And such testimonies are innumerable. Indeed, the whole of Scripture bears witness against it.

If, therefore, this controversy is to be decided by Scripture, then the victory belongs entirely to the doctrine of grace. There is not one passage remaining that does not overthrow the claims of Free-will.

If the great defenders of Free-will neither understand nor acknowledge that Scripture everywhere presents Christ in this exclusive manner, Christians nevertheless understand it instinctively.

All believers know and confess that there are two kingdoms in the world, standing in perpetual opposition to one another.

In the one kingdom Satan reigns.

For this reason Christ calls him:

"The prince of this world."

And Paul calls him:

"The god of this world."

According to the same apostle, Satan holds men captive at his will. Nor can anyone be delivered from his dominion except by the Spirit of Christ.

No human power can rescue a man from that bondage.

Christ Himself teaches this in the parable of the strong man who keeps his palace in peace until a stronger than he comes and overcomes him.

In the other kingdom Christ reigns.

This kingdom continually opposes and wars against the kingdom of Satan.

Into Christ's kingdom we are translated, not by any power of our own, but solely by the grace of God.

It is God who delivers us from this present evil world.

It is God who rescues us from the power of darkness.

The existence of these two kingdoms alone is sufficient to overthrow the doctrine of Free-will.

For if men are held under the dominion of Satan until they are delivered by divine power, then it is impossible that they should possess

a freedom by which they can prepare themselves for grace or move themselves toward salvation.

This truth is acknowledged throughout the whole Christian Church.

It is confessed in her prayers.

It is confessed in her preaching.

It is confessed in her hymns.

It is confessed in the daily experience of believers.

For all Christians know that salvation belongs to the Lord alone, and that the sinner is rescued, not by his own power, but by the victorious grace of God.

Section CLXIV

I omit to bring forward that truly Achillean passage of mine, which the Diatribe proudly passes over untouched: namely, that teaching of Paul in Romans 7 and Galatians 5, where he declares that even in the saints and in those who have been renewed by grace, there is such a powerful conflict between the flesh and the Spirit that they cannot do the very things that they would.

From this warfare I reason as follows:

If human nature remains so corrupted, even in those who have been born again by the Spirit of God, that it not only fails to pursue what is good but actively opposes and wars against it, how much more must this be true of those who remain unregenerate, still under the dominion of the old man and under the rule of Satan?

Nor is Paul speaking merely of what some call the "grosser passions," by which the defenders of Free-will commonly attempt to escape the force of Scripture.

Among the works of the flesh he includes heresies, idolatry, strife, divisions, and similar sins—things that arise from the highest faculties of man, namely his reason and his will.

If, therefore, the flesh wages war against the Spirit even in believers, then it wages war far more fiercely against God Himself in the unbelieving.

This is why Paul calls the carnal mind:

"Enmity against God."

I should like to see this argument answered and overturned, and Free-will successfully defended against it.

For my own part, I freely confess that even if Free-will existed and were granted to me, I would not desire to possess it.

Nor would I wish any part of my salvation to be left in my own hands, whereby I might contribute something toward securing eternal life.

And I say this not merely because, amid so many dangers, temptations, and assaults of devils, I could never be certain of preserving it.

One devil is stronger than all men combined, and if salvation depended in any degree upon human strength, no one could possibly be saved.

But even if there were no devils, no temptations, and no dangers, I would still be compelled to labour under continual uncertainty.

My conscience could never attain certainty.

Even if I were to labour and strive throughout eternity, I could never know whether I had done enough to satisfy God.

Whatever work I performed, the question would always remain:

Have I done enough?

Does this please God?

Does He require something more?

This uncertainty is the experience of every person who seeks justification through works.

I know it well, for I learned it through bitter experience during many years of my own life.

But now, since God has taken my salvation out of my own hands and placed it entirely into His own keeping, and has promised to save me, not according to my works or efforts, but according to His mercy and grace, I possess certainty and confidence.

I know that He is faithful.

I know that He cannot lie.

I know that no devil, no enemy, and no created power can pluck me from His hand.

As Christ Himself says:

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me:

And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand."

— John 10:27–29

Therefore, although not all men are saved, yet many certainly shall

be saved.

But if salvation depended upon Free-will, none would be saved.

All would perish together.

Furthermore, we have confidence that we please God, not because of the merit of our works, but because of His gracious promise.

And if our works are weak, imperfect, or deficient, He does not cast us away.

Rather, like a loving Father, He forgives us, corrects us, and continues His work within us.

This is the true comfort of the Gospel.

This is the confidence of the saints.

And this is the glorying of all believers in their God.

Section CLXV

And if you are troubled by this difficulty—that it seems hard to defend the mercy and justice of God when He condemns those who appear undeserving of condemnation; that is, those who are ungodly because, being born in sin, they are unable by any power of their own to prevent themselves from remaining ungodly and under condemnation, but are compelled by the corruption of their nature to sin and perish, as Paul says:

"And were by nature the children of wrath, even as others."

— Ephesians 2:3

while at the same time they have inherited this corruption through Adam's fall—

Then let us remember that God is to be honoured and worshipped as perfectly righteous and perfectly merciful.

His mercy shines forth in the salvation of those who are wholly undeserving.

His justice remains true even when our reason cannot comprehend it.

Indeed, it belongs to the wisdom of faith to acknowledge God as righteous even where He appears, according to human judgment, to be otherwise.

For if God's righteousness were such that it could be fully measured, examined, and approved by human reason, it would no longer be divine righteousness.

It would differ little from human righteousness.

But since God is the one true God, infinite, incomprehensible, and beyond the reach of human understanding, it is both fitting and necessary that His righteousness should also be beyond our comprehension.

As Paul exclaims:

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

— Romans 11:33

But if His judgments could be completely understood by us, they would no longer be unsearchable.

If His ways could be fully traced out by human reason, they would no longer be God's ways.

What is man compared with God?

What is human power compared with divine omnipotence?

What is human wisdom compared with divine wisdom?

What is human knowledge compared with the knowledge of God?

What is our being compared with His eternal and infinite Being?

Indeed, what is all that we are compared with all that He is?

If, then, we readily confess that our strength, wisdom, understanding, and existence are nothing when compared with God's, why do we refuse to make the same confession concerning His judgments?

Why are we willing to acknowledge His greatness in every other respect, yet insist that His justice must submit itself to our understanding?

Why do we not rather confess:

Our judgment is nothing when compared with the judgment of God.

Even natural reason, if it were honest, would be compelled to admit this.

For if God's power, wisdom, and majesty are beyond our comprehension, why should His righteousness alone be subject to our examination?

In every other matter we freely concede that God is infinitely above us.

Yet when His judgments are before us, we seek to bring Him down to our level and demand that He explain Himself before our tribunal.

Such reasoning is both foolish and arrogant.

Let us instead believe His promise.

For though we cannot now fully understand His ways, the day shall come when He will reveal His glory.

Then we shall see clearly.

Then we shall understand perfectly.

Then we shall know beyond all doubt that God has always been righteous, always acted righteously, and can do nothing but what is righteous.

What we now believe by faith, we shall then behold openly.

And what now appears mysterious shall then be revealed as perfectly just.

Section CLXVI

But I will produce an example which may strengthen this faith and bring comfort to that troubled mind which is tempted to accuse God of injustice.

Consider how God governs this present world in outward and visible things.

If human reason alone were allowed to judge, it would often be compelled either to deny that there is a God at all, or else to conclude that God is unjust.

Indeed, one writer confessed:

"I am often tempted to think there is no God."

For what do we see?

The wicked prosper.

The righteous suffer.

Experience itself, which is the mother of proverbs, continually bears witness to this fact.

The more wicked many men become, the more successful they appear.

As Job says:

"The tabernacles of robbers prosper."

And the Psalmist laments:

"The ungodly prosper in the world; they increase in riches."

To human judgment this appears profoundly unjust.

Should not the wicked suffer and the righteous prosper?

Yet the opposite so often occurs before our eyes.

This difficulty has caused many of the greatest minds to stumble.

Some have denied the existence of God altogether.

Others have imagined that blind fortune governs the world.

Epicurus and Pliny reasoned in this manner.

Aristotle, wishing to preserve his First Cause from all disturbance

and sorrow, concluded that God concerns Himself with nothing outside Himself, for he thought it impossible that God could behold so many evils and injustices without misery.

Nor were the prophets themselves untouched by this temptation.

Jeremiah wrestled with it.

Job wrestled with it.

David wrestled with it.

Asaph wrestled with it.

All were troubled by the prosperity of the wicked and the afflictions of the righteous.

And what of men such as Demosthenes and Cicero?

After spending their lives in the pursuit of virtue and public service, they met miserable and tragic ends.

To human reason this appears to be injustice.

Yet the Gospel solves the difficulty.

The light of grace reveals what the light of nature cannot see.

We learn that the wicked may prosper outwardly and yet lose their souls.

We learn that this present life is not the whole story.

The entire difficulty is answered by one truth:

There is a life beyond this life.

There is a judgment beyond this world.

There is a future recompense in which every wrong shall be corrected, every injustice exposed, every evil punished, and every righteousness rewarded.

This present life is only the entrance and beginning of the life to come.

Thus the Gospel settles in a moment what human wisdom could never resolve through centuries of speculation.

Now consider further.

If the light of grace is able so easily to solve a difficulty which the light of nature could never answer, how much more will the light of glory solve those difficulties which now remain hidden even from faith?

When faith gives way to sight, and the majesty of God is openly revealed, all mysteries shall be made plain.

Will not the light of glory explain what now seems impossible to understand, just as the light of grace already explains what nature could never comprehend?

Let us therefore distinguish carefully between three lights:

The light of nature.

The light of grace.

The light of glory.

This is a useful and necessary distinction.

By the light of nature it is impossible to understand why the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper.

The light of grace resolves that question.

By the light of nature—and even by the light of grace—it remains difficult to understand how God can justly condemn a sinner who can do nothing but sin.

Both nature and grace are tempted to say:

"The fault seems to lie not with man, but with God."

Yet the light of glory will reveal what is now hidden.

Then it shall be seen that God, whose righteousness now appears incomprehensible, has always acted in perfect justice.

Then every objection shall be silenced.

Then every mystery shall be explained.

Then every mouth shall confess that God's judgments were altogether righteous.

For the present, we believe what we cannot yet see.

And we are encouraged to do so by the example already before us.

The light of grace has solved what nature could never solve.

Therefore we may confidently trust that the light of glory will one day solve what now remains hidden even from faith itself.

Section CLXVII

Conclusion

Here I shall bring this book to its conclusion, though I remain fully prepared to continue the discussion if necessary. However, I believe I have now more than sufficiently answered every sincere believer who desires to embrace the truth without resisting it.

For if we believe it to be true that God foreknows and foreordains all things; that He can neither be deceived nor hindered in His foreknowledge and predestination; and that nothing can happen except according to His will—which even human reason is compelled to acknowledge—then it follows, even by the testimony of reason itself, that there can be no such thing as Free Will in man, in angels, or in any created being.

Moreover, if we believe that Satan is the prince of this world, continually seeking to ensnare and oppose the kingdom of Christ with all his power, and that he never releases his captives unless compelled by the mighty power of the Holy Spirit, then it is equally clear that there can be no such thing as Free Will.

Again, if we believe that original sin has so corrupted mankind that even the godly, who are led by the Spirit, experience continual conflict as sin strives against all that is good, then it is evident that nothing remains in the unregenerate man that can turn itself towards good. Rather, everything within him must turn towards evil.

Again, if the Jews, who pursued righteousness with all their strength, nevertheless fell into unrighteousness, while the Gentiles, who had not pursued righteousness, obtained a righteousness they had never expected, then both Scripture and experience plainly demonstrate that man, apart from grace, can do nothing but will that which is evil.

Finally, if we believe that Christ redeemed men by His blood, we are compelled to confess that the whole man was lost. Otherwise, we make Christ unnecessary, or we reduce Him to being a Redeemer of only the worst part of man. Such a notion is both blasphemous and sacrilegious.

Section CLXVIII

And now, my friend Erasmus, I appeal to you for Christ's sake to fulfil the promise you made. You said that you would willingly yield to anyone who could teach you more accurately than you presently understood.

Lay aside all respect of persons. I freely acknowledge that you are a man greatly gifted by God. Apart from many other advantages, you possess remarkable intelligence, learning, and eloquence. As for myself, I am nothing and have nothing in which to boast, except that I glory in being a Christian.

In one respect especially I gladly commend you. Unlike all the others who have attacked me, you have engaged with the real issue. You did not weary me with endless arguments about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and similar trifles—matters which others have continually raised in an attempt to defeat me, though always unsuccessfully.

You alone recognised the true turning point of the controversy. You saw the central question upon which everything depends, and you directed your attack there. For that I sincerely thank you. It is this kind

of discussion that I willingly undertake whenever time and opportunity permit.

Had my previous opponents done the same, and had those who now boast of new revelations and new spiritual insights followed the same course, there would be far less division and sectarianism in the Church, and far more peace and unity. But God, through the agency of Satan, has allowed our ingratitude to be chastened in this way.

Nevertheless, if you cannot handle this subject more effectively than you have done in your Diatribe, then I would urge you to remain within the sphere of work for which God has especially equipped you. Continue your study, promotion, and refinement of literature and languages, as you have done so successfully in the past. In that field you have rendered great service, not only to others but also to me. I freely acknowledge how much I owe to your labours, and I gladly honour and respect you for them.

But as for this particular controversy, God has neither called nor equipped you to deal with it successfully. Do not take this as arrogance on my part. Rather, I pray that the Lord may daily increase your understanding in these matters, just as He has already made you far superior to me in many other areas.

It is no new thing for God to teach a Moses through a Jethro, or to instruct a Paul through an Ananias.

You have said that a man may miss the mark entirely if he is ignorant of Christ. On that point, I believe you know what you mean. Yet it does not follow that everyone errs simply because you or I may err. God is glorified in His saints in ways that are often beyond our understanding. Indeed, some whom the world considers least likely to possess true holiness are often those in whom His grace shines most brightly.

Nor is it impossible that you, being only a man, may sometimes misunderstand the Scriptures or fail to weigh carefully enough the testimony of the Fathers, upon whom you rely so heavily. The fact that this may be so is evident from your own statement that you merely offer opinions rather than firm assertions. No man speaks in that way who is fully persuaded of his position and thoroughly understands the matter under discussion.

As for myself, I have not merely collected opinions. In this book I have asserted what I believe to be true, and I continue to assert it. I do not ask men to sit in judgment over these truths. Rather, I ask them to acknowledge and receive them.

And may the Lord, whose cause this is, enlighten you, make you a vessel unto honour, and use you for His glory.

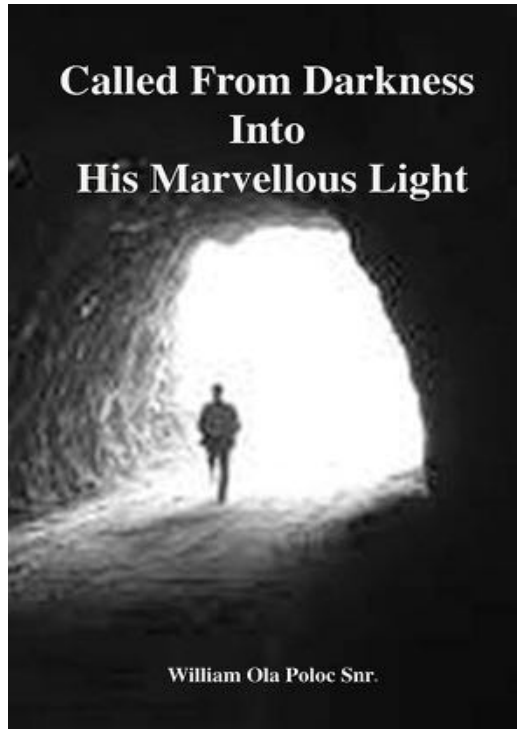
Amen.

FINIS

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FURTHER READING

CALLED FROM DARKNESS INTO HIS MARVELLOUS LIGHT



William Poloc

William Poloc was a prisoner in New Bilibid Prison and served a period of 14 years for a crime of homicide. During his imprisonment he was called by the Lord Jesus to follow him and he turned his back on his criminal past. He read the bible and studied theology and he learned and understood the doctrines of grace and became a teacher of the gospel I met William in New Bilibid Prison, in October 2001, as I was the Director of a Christian Mission called Trojan Horse International.

In August 2002 William was released from prison and Trojan Horse International commissioned and sent William, on his release to go to his home city in Baguio and preach the Gospel to inmates of Baguio City Jail and Benguet Provincial Jail.

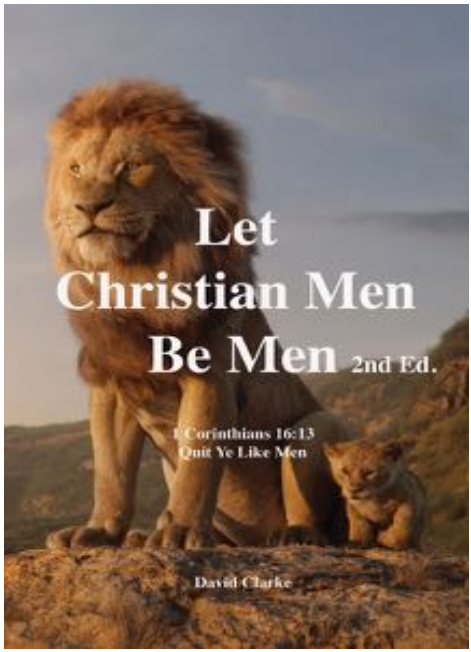
In October, 2002 I visited Baguio City Jail, as the mission director and a sent minister of Bierton Strict and Particular Baptists, and baptized

22 inmates, who had been converted from crime to Christ, through the ministry of William Poloc. I also baptized 8 souls in Benguet Provincial jail who too had been converted from crime to Christ, though the ministry of William Poloc. These events took place was at the same time that the Bierton Strict Baptist Chapel held its last worship service, in the United Kingdom, which was on the 22nd December. 2002.

William, as his testimony will tell, has worked these past 20 years preaching and teaching the gospel and founded Baguio Christ Centred Churches. And we praise God for being able to tell of the wonderful works of God in saving sinners, in and though faith, in the Lord Jesus Christ.

David Clarke
Director of Trojan Horse International April 2022

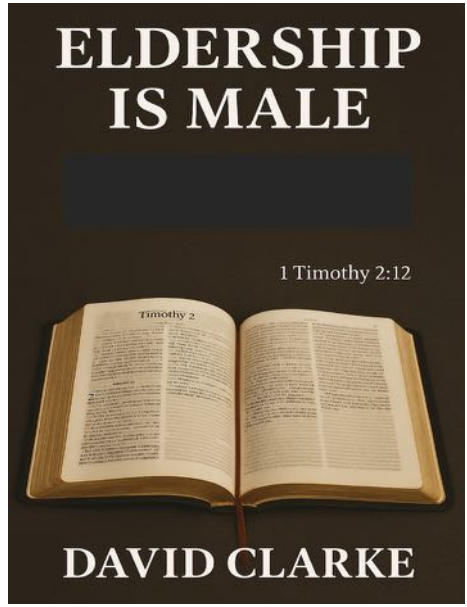
LET CHRISTIAN MEN BE MEN



David Clarke tells of his Secession from the Bierton Strict and Particular Baptist Church, in 1984 over matters of conscience. This Church was formed in 1831 and was a Calvinist Protestant deserting society and became a Gospel Standard cause in 1981. Sadly the church fell into serious doctrinal error teaching general redemption this was just one

of the reasons for his secession. David was called by the Lord and sent by the church the gospel in 1982When acting as the secretary he had to deal with a range of serious issues that arose within the church. This book deals with all those doctrinal and practical issues that arose and how he responded to them. He deals with the reasons for his secession and clearly spells out the distinguishing doctrines of grace treating the subjects of Particular Redemption, Gospel preaching the false notion of Duty Faith and Duty Repentance, the role of women in the church, Articles of Religion, and the relationship of the believer to the Law of Moses. He maintains the gospel is the believer's rule of life for the believer and not the law of Moses. That there are no such things holy tables and the chapel building is not the house of God. David remains the sole member of the Church after all its former members died and that the church did not terminate his membership after his secession David continues his mission work and calling published a range of Christian books and has been engaged in gospel ministry in Pakistan and the Philippines.

ELDERSHIP IS MALE



Second Edition: Does The Lord Jesus Want Women To Rule As Elders In His Church ? ?

When treating the subject of women elders in the church we are not dealing with the affairs of a secular society and so it has nothing to do with women's rights, equality of sex or race in the world. This matter only relates to men and women in a Christian church. It is about the rules of the house of God, which is the church of the living God and rules for those who are members of the body of Christ and members of an heavenly county.

The Suffragettes

Emmeline Pankhurst 1858 -1928) was a Suffragette and worked very hard to bring equal rights for women to vote as men. In the year of her death all women over 21 gained the right to vote. The Suffragette movement brought about many changes for the better in a secular society but not so for women seeking to follow Christian principles. One of her famous quotes was, "Trust in God She shall provide". Terms which do not reflect Christian beliefs. We know God will provide and He is not a she.

In the USA and the UK, women's political rights were brought into general political consciousness by the suffragettes and since then there have been legal rights granted to the Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups, same sex marriages, along with the development of the feminist movement and the appointment of persons from the LBGT community to responsible positions in the Church of England. All of this has caused conflict in the Christian community due to differences beliefs of right and wrong.

This book seeks to show what the bible has to say about the role of women in the church and family. Since these rules are taught by the Apostles of Christ they are the word of God to us and we should obey. The secular world may differ and turn from the narrow path taught in scripture but we should follow the word of God, this is our wisdom.

CONVERTED ON LSD TRIP



The Bucks Herald

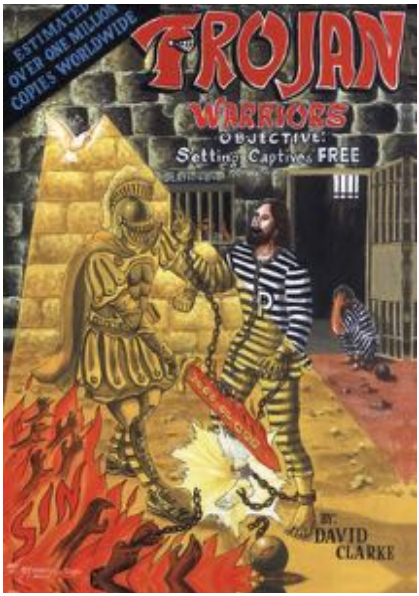
CONVERTED ON LSD TRIP

By David Clarke (Author)

3rd Edition Paperback – 3 Jun. 2020

This third edition of, 'Converted on LSD Trip', is written to bring attention to the reality of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, in changing the lives of David Clarke, whilst on a bad trip on LSD, on 16th January 1970, and the life of his brother Michael Clarke, some 30 years later, when a prisoner, in the Philippines, and making them evangelist workers seeking to teach the gospel of Christ to men. It is intended to use this book as a tool for evangelism in order to encourage others in the work of preaching the gospel of Christ to men. This is also intended to draw attention to the work of Jesus Christ now in Baguio City, Philippines , by William O. Poloc a former inmate of New Bilibid Prison. It is believed and stressed that it is important to teach the traditional Christian doctrines of grace, to combat the error of modern-day Godliness, unbelief, homosexuality, feminism, Islam and of the importance of teaching the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the infallibility of the word of God

TROJAN WARRIORS



Setting Captives Free

Authored by Mr David Clarke CertEd, Authored by Mr Michael J Clarke

Trojan Warriors is a true story of two brothers, Michael and David Clarke, who are brought up in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, England. They became criminals in the 60's and were sent to prison for malicious wounding and carrying a fire arm without a license, in 1967.

They both turned from their lives of crimes in remarkable ways but some 25 years apart, and then they worked together helping other prison inmates, on their own roads of reformation.

David the younger brother became a Christian, after a bad experience on LSD, in 1970, and then went on to educate himself and then on to Higher Education. He became a baptist minister and taught electronics for over 20 years, in colleges of Higher and Further Education. Michael however remained untouched and continued his flamboyant life style ending up serving a 16 year prison sentence, in the Philippines, in 1996, where he died of tuberculosis in 2005.

When David heard the news of his brothers arrest on an ITN television news bulletin he felt compelled to wrote their story. And then when he heard of his own brothers conversion from crime to Christ,

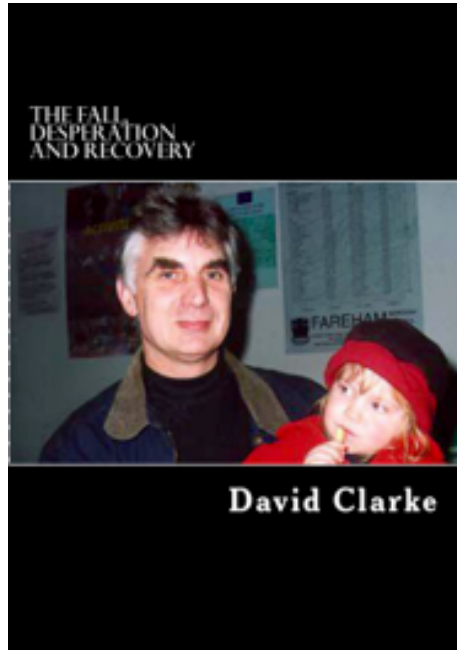
after serving 5 year of his sentence, he published their story in his book, "Converted on LS Trip", and directed a mission of help to the Philippines to assist his brother. This book tells the story of this mission.

They then worked together with many former notorious criminals, who were inmates in New Bilibid Prison, who too had become Christians and turned their lives around. This help was to train them to become preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ .

This book contains the 66 testimonies of some of these men who convicted former criminals, incarcerated in New Bilibid Prison. They are the, "Trojan Warriors", who had turned their lives around and from crime to Christ. Twenty two of these testimonies are men who are on Death Row scheduled to be executed by lethal injection.

Revelation 12 verse 11: And they overcame him by the blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony and they loved not their lives unto the death.

THE FALL, DESPERATION AND RECOVERY



By Mr David Clarke CertEd (Author)

David encountered great conflicts of conscience whilst at the Bierton Strict and Particular Baptists Church and seceded over matters of conscience. For two years he wondered what the future held for him and

wondered about the direction that he should go. This led him to severe depression thinking that God had rejected him and then to a desperate state of mind resulting in him turning away from God and to open sin. This is the continuing story of David life as told in his book , "Converted on LSD Trip", and relates the journey that led to his fall, the desperation, recovery and restoration to faith in Christ . He tells of the good news he received of his brother Michael and his conversion from crime to Christ, that took place 5 years into a 16 year prison sentence, in the Philippines. This was 30 years after David 's own conversion from crime to Christ, which was the moving factor behind publishing his book, "Converted on LSD Trip." David believes this book will be very useful for people of all ages who wish to see the hand of God at work and in particular for those learning the Christian faith.